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CACTUS JACK, THE GIANT GUIDE; Or, THE MASKED ROBBERS OF BLACK BEND.

A STORY OF NEW MEXICO.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "THE LADY JAGUAR," ETC., ETC.



AS HE NEARED THEM, WHIRLING END OVER END, CACTUS JACK AND ZEKE WERE THRILLED WITH A FEELING OF HORROR.

Cactus Jack, THE GIANT GUIDE;

OR,

The Masked Robbers of Black Bend.

A Story of New Mexico.

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CHAPTER I.

THE BARRANCA OF DEATH.

HOTLY pursued, yet bravely defiant, two white men were riding across a wide plain of New Mexico with a score of Apache Indians speeding in their rear. The plain was no more than a desert, and at each step the blood-bay horses of the foremost men sunk ankle-deep in the sand, but though white foam was on their sides, they were still going gallantly.

Considering the locality, the scene was not a strange one, for it was where the red-handed savages roam rough-shod and make war on whoever crosses their path, but the resolute front of these stout white men showed that they had little awe or fear for the red warriors.

Americans born and bred were they, if appearances went for anything, and they had every sign that goes to mark the veteran borderman.

"How many bullets left, Boze?" one of the two suddenly demanded.

"Six," was the terse reply.

"And I have four."

"It's durned hard luck," muttered Boze, disconsolately.

"Hard! It's worse than that—it's infernal tough. Here we are, old bordermen and dead shots, running like prairie dogs from them red heathens, and all because our bullets are used up. Oh, hang the miserable, sneaking, one-horse luck!"

"Take et cool, Cactus Jack; take et cool, boyee. We kain't change ther sarcumstances, an' we orter be thankful our good hosses kin take us safet away. Them bucks ride proper fast, but ef we say ther word, these beauties will soon leave 'em."

He patted the neck of his horse as he spoke.

"The horses are all right; they are rattlers; but that's just why I hate to heat them up to oblige a mess of dirty 'Paches. I'm going to drop another."

He wheeled in his saddle, firing so quickly that he seemed to take no aim, but at the crack a grim warrior went down out of his saddle.

"Another down," he shouted, boisterously.

"An' one bullet ther less," Boze tersely said.

"Only nine left!" groaned Cactus Jack. "Never mind, though, old man; let's have a picnic while we can. Wheel and fire, you mountain tiger."

Boze hesitated; but, yielding to the impulse, obeyed the request, and another Apache was left on the sand.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Jack, "we ain't no chicks with the shooting-irons. Look at the weapons those dogs carry. We are as safe at this distance as though ten miles away. Let's fire again."

They acted on the suggestion, and each dropped his man.

"This won't do," said Boze, quickly. "We have only six bullets left, an' if we—"

He paused as Cactus Jack, having hastily reloaded, added one more to the red line of dead men on the plain, and then his companion shut his jaws with a snap.

"Five bullets left! We must stop," he admitted. "Oh! 'd give a square million to have my pockets full of lead now."

"An' I reckon them reds we dropped would give es much ef they had et ter get rid o' what they hev," Boze grimly observed.

Half a mile further they went, and then Cactus Jack suddenly pulled in his horse and pointed to the rear. He added a shout of joy, and even Boze grew exultant, for the Apaches had ceased pursuit, and were turning back.

The chase had been abandoned.

The white men were pleased, but it was not wise to tarry there; so they spoke again to their horses, and rode on at a leisurely pace. While they go, let us introduce them more fully.

Cactus Jack was a young man, less than thirty, but he had the reputation of being one of the best bordermen in the Southwest. More than once he had served as a Government guide, and always to his credit; and as a scout, hunter, and mustanger, he had few superiors. He was almost a giant in size, standing over six feet, and measuring equally well in other respects; but one glance at his face, which was smooth and boyish, would show that his strength would never be used in a brutal way.

Men liked the giant guide, and they had good reason. Honest, faithful, good-natured, saga-

cious and bold as a borderer—he possessed all the qualities that go to make the true man.

Zeke Bozeman was twenty years his senior, a grizzled, resolute-looking man, not so tall as Jack, but with a breadth of shoulders and chest that indicated great muscular power. His real name was known only to himself, that by which he was called having been gained by some heroic exploit at Bozeman Pass, up in Montana, a country in which he flourished exclusively until he came South, fell in with Cactus Jack, and so began a friendship which never wavered.

Veterans were they in the fullest sense of the word, and no man could say aught against them in any way.

After leaving the Apaches, they rode on for some time in silence, but Bozeman finally spoke again.

"Boyee," he said, "I've be'n a-thinkin' that it would be a good idee fur us ter give up ther trip ter Santa Fe fur ther present, and push fur Fort Black instead."

"Are you crazy?" Jack asked, in astonishment.

"Not as I knows on, but ther 'Paches hev driv' us out o' our bee-line fur Santa Fe, an' et seems ter me our best way is ter push fur ther fort an' stock up with grub and ammunition."

"We can get it at Santa Fe."

"Yas, arter crossin' a good bit o' territory, with only five bullets ter back us up."

"Ain't that enough?"

"Scarcely."

"Bah! I could travel from Yuma to Cheyenne City with an empty gun," said Jack, who had a weakness for boasting.

"Kim, now, you rascal, none o' your nonsense to me," said Bozeman, grimly. "Your logic ain't clear cut, fur it ain't two hours sence you war howlin' like a norther 'cause we were out o' lead. Besides, I know you!"

The last words were very significant, and Cactus Jack burst into a laugh. He was seldom very boastful or obstinate when with his partner, and they agreed better than most people of minds less strong.

"Zeke Bozeman, you are a hog and a despot. Why should you come down here from your mountains and try to boss the portable cactus of the South. Ain't you got any modesty in your carcass?"

"I come from where they raise men, an' ther New Mexicans need sech ter lead 'em," retorted Bozeman.

The two looked at each other with friendly eyes, and then the young giant laughed again.

"You'll have your own way, of course. You always do. If I have a failing in the world it is that of being too modest. So you want to go to Fort Black?"

"That's the size on't."

"Then we'll go. Maybe we'll find some fun down there. Black Bend has a few inhabitants, and we will see what can be done there. The fort has got a new commander since I was there, and he ought to have a chance to shake hands with the cactus king."

They turned a little more toward the south and rode on in a contented mood.

It would have been hard to find two men more satisfied with their lots than they. Neither had a care in the world beyond the demands of the moment; neither had a person in all the wide world to look after except himself.

When Zeke Bozeman came down from the rugged mountains of Montana and met Cactus Jack, they seemed to be at once drawn to each other. Thenceforth, they rode for the most part together, whether engaged in mining, scouting or hunting, and theirs was a placid life in spite of its dangers. Free from shadows of the past, from loves of the present and forebodings of the future, they went their way and gave little thought to the morrow.

On the present occasion, they did not intend to reach Fort Black before the middle of the next forenoon. It might be done by daylight, but their horses were jaded and they proposed to give them rest during a portion of the night.

As they went on, darkness fell over the plain. They improved the last gleam of day to sweep the level with keen glances, but there was nowhere any sign of Apache or other foes. Unless hidden by arroyo or barranca (clefs in the earth) none were anywhere about, for the sandy plain did not give life even to sage-brush. "In an hour's time," said the young giant, "we will reach the Barranca de Muerte, and there I reckon we had better halt for the night."

"The Barranca of Death!" repeated Zeke. "That is a right cheerful name, an' I s'pose ther place is equally so, but I hope thar ain't anythin' ketchin' in ther name."

"We'll be as safe as prairie dogs, Boze. It got its name because a score of soldiers were once killed there by the durned Apaches. They were hemmed in and cut to pieces one by one, but we don't keer for ghosts or red varmints, whatever their pedigree."

"I reckon I kin bear it. Lead on," was the grim reply.

For some time longer they rode leisurely in the darkness, and then, before Zeke suspected the fact, reached the upper end of the barranca. These freaks of nature are always surprises on

the southwest plain, for many of them are so unheralded by anything that a man may ride to the very edge without knowing he is near one.

They vary greatly in size, some being miles across and hundreds of feet deep, but the Barranca de Muerte was not large. At its widest part it was not more than two hundred feet and half as deep.

It was shallow where they entered, and they went on without inconvenience or comment. Jack looked only to see that no foe was near, but Bozeman, who had never seen the place before, photographed all in his mind as a part of his trade. There were few men who knew Montana better than he, and he was fast learning New Mexico.

Half a mile further on, the giant suddenly paused.

"Here we rest," he said.

Bozeman looked at the dark walls of the cleft, which were about a hundred feet apart, but made no answer.

"Near the eastern cliff is a pool of fine water, and this, with what we carry, is all we need," added Cactus Jack, as he leaped from his horse.

It was soon shown that he had made a good choice of location. It was as retired as any, and when the mountain man had sampled the water he found it good. The horses, too, seemed to appreciate it, and when they had taken enough, they were rubbed down and given the food brought along for their use.

A few yards from the pool was a sizable niche, and in this they were corraled and left to themselves.

The men were hungry, and they were not long in occupying the outside half of the recess and devoting themselves to their humble supper.

Thus, the barranca assumed its former appearance. The pool was deserted, and, in the niche, horses and men were so well concealed that an army of soldiers might have tramped through without seeing them.

Supper over, the guides smoked their pipes, but they were so tired that conversation was fitful and they were not long in thinking of sleep. The horses had already laid down, and when their masters spread out their blankets and followed their example, utter silence fell upon the barranca.

An hour passed. By that time both men were sleeping soundly, so soundly, in fact, after their long ride, that one would almost have thought it possible for an enemy to steal upon them unawares and end their career; but men of such callings as theirs sleep ever on the alert and not much is required to awaken them.

Cactus Jack suddenly became conscious. His first feeling was that he had been aroused by other than natural causes, but his mind was perfectly clear and he made no injudicious move.

His face was toward the main barranca as he lay, and, without raising his head, he looked steadily into the darkness.

As he did so, a well-known sound came to his hearing. It was the stamp of a horse's hoof on the sand, but it came from outside the recess and one glance showed him that both of their own horses were still behind them.

Before he could reflect further, Bozeman's hand was laid on his arm.

"What is it?" Jack cautiously asked.

"We have got neighbors," answered the mountaineer.

"Who are they?"

"Durned ef I know. I war awoke by a crunchin' in the sand, an' I plainly heerd horses a-movin', but they had passed my line o' observation afore I got my eyes open. They are at ther pool now."

"Have you any idea how many?"

"Not an idee. Thar may be twenty or only two. Do you s'pose it is a 'Pache war-party?"

"Maybe so, or it may be they are messengers from some emigrant train after water."

The speaker silently gained his feet, and Bozeman followed his example.

"We must have a look at them," said Jack.

"Sartin."

"Well, here goes for a squint."

The giant swung his rifle over his shoulder with an air that indicated he was about to strike from the recess, but Bozeman knew him too well to fear that. Both looked to see that their weapons were in place and then crept toward the point of interest.

No awkward movement betrayed their presence, and they were soon at the corner, where they paused before exposing their heads.

"Voices!" Cactus Jack said, cautiously.

"White men, too," added the mountaineer.

"Friends, maybe; possibly enemies."

The guide thrust his head forward and the vicinity of the pool was open to his gaze.

First of all, he saw three horses, and, just beyond them, as many men. The latter were talking, but their voices were so low that no words could be distinguished. Even in the darkness, however, Cactus Jack saw that they were of his own race, and had he not possessed a strong vein of caution under his boisterous exterior, he might have at once uncovered himself.

As it was, he remembered that all men in

New Mexico were not honest if they did have white skins, and it would be well to watch these fellows for a time.

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY.

ZEKE BOZEMAN touched the giant's arm.

"What is that on ther ground?" he asked.

The younger man looked and saw a dark bundle near the men, but, in the darkness, it was impossible to tell what it was. He shook his head in silence, but Zeke's voice had been tinged with suspicion, and both began to suspect that some nefarious scheme was afoot.

The conversation of the strangers began to assume the air of a controversy, and it became evident that one was opposing the will of the other two. Cactus Jack tried in vain to distinguish some of their words, but only the murmur reached their ears.

Finally, he who was in the minority turned abruptly away, laid his hand on one of the horses and vaulted into the saddle.

"Where are you going?" one of his companions asked, in a louder voice.

"Anywhere, to get away from here. I'll take no part in such work, fer it is beyond my caliber. If you will go on, I'll not oppose you, but, remember, I wash my hands of the whole affair."

He turned his horse down the barranca, and rode past the niche without looking back. The concealed guides saw a long beard under his slouched hat, but even had they known him well it would have been hard to recognize him.

As he receded, the two who remained spoke together earnestly for a moment, and then seized upon the bundle as though to hurriedly perform some work. Evidently they acted against some considerable weight, but they moved in concert, and the bundle was lifted, swung back, then forward, after which a sullen splash followed as it was flung into the pool.

Cactus Jack caught his comrade's arm in a crushing grasp. He had caught sight of a white face in the darkness, the face of a human being, and his blood fairly leaped through his veins as he comprehended the purpose of the strangers.

The elder scout was equally affected, for a shiver passed over his stout frame. The dark deed, the night of equal darkness, the black and frowning rocks—all made a somber and uncanny picture.

No wonder the third assassin had become conscience-stricken and fled; no wonder the remaining two, as soon as their work was done, turned to their horses, mounted and dashed down the barranca at a gallop.

Bozeman tried in vain to scan their faces as they passed the niche, but a sudden movement on the part of Cactus Jack diverted his attention from the pair.

The young giant dropped his rifle as though it had been red-hot, and darted toward the pool. The dark surface was once more placid and unruffled—its strange legacy had been completely swallowed.

With rapid movements he tore off his outer garments, but just then Bozeman confronted him.

"Be you goin' in?" the mountaineer asked.

"Yes," was the terse reply.

"Do you know ther kind o' a place you would enter? Thar may be a quicksand at ther bottom, or—"

"Bah! don't preach to me. I'll go in if the whole bottom falls through."

Bozeman said no more, nor was time given him. Almost in a twinkling Cactus Jack had stripped for the work, and this done he did not long hesitate. There was a splash and he disappeared in the pool.

The elder man looked after him dubiously. Probably he would encounter no danger, but, somehow, Zeke's mind was affected by the circumstance.

"Durn ther luck! why didn't I think ter tie a lasso ter his weest? It would have pulled him in ef trouble had come, an' I hev a suspicion thar will be trouble."

He stared gloomily at the pool, but, sooner than he had dared hope, the surface was broken and the head of Cactus Jack appeared. One or two strokes of his arm took him to the edge, and then Zeke gave his aid and pulled him to land.

Nor was this all; on one arm the giant bore the same dark bundle before seen, and the mountaineer uttered a cry as he laid it on the sand.

"A woman, by ther Eternal!"

"Don't stop to talk; I fear she is past our aid, but we must try to resuscitate her," said Jack, who was none the worse for his bath.

"Easy es mud. She ain't b'en in thar long enough ter burt her, an' ef she was alive at ther start, we'll soon hev her breathin' ag'in."

They bent over her together and tore away a blanket in which she was wrapped. Then they saw that her hands were bound and a gag in her mouth, but these were soon torn away.

Men of their experience are good physicians, and, regardless of all around them, they worked with zeal for the next few minutes.

"Thar, leave her alone now," said Bozeman, at length. "We've did all we kin, an' I prophesy she will be all right in a jiffy."

"She is young and handsome," said Cactus Jack, looking at the pale face.

"My old eyes ain't so sharp, but I'll take your word for it. Mebbe you'll lose your heart over her yit."

"Bah! do you take me for a milksop? I leave love to the lords of civilization. None of it for the tornado of the Mimbres. Besides, I should pity the woman who cottoned on to me. I'm a cactus tree, sixty feet tall, and ail thorns."

"What do you make out o' this affair, anyway?" the mountaineer asked, more thoughtfully.

"Nothing. Do you?"

"No. I can't see why anybody should want ter kill this lump o' female prittiness."

"She will probably explain when she recovers."

"We were durned thick-heads ter let them critters go. We had 'em right in our grup, an' we stood like stuns an' let 'em slip out."

"We made a mighty big blunder; I'll admit that. Maybe this girl can't tell who they were; in which case they may not go unpunished. Shoot me if I don't kill every one of them, if I get a chance. I'll make 'em think a paralytic shock is waltzing up and down their spine."

"Sh! Didn't ther gal sigh?"

They turned toward the unknown, but she was lying perfectly still. Cactus Jack bent over her for a moment, and then looked up quickly.

"She breathes, Boze. Wait a bit longer, and she will be all right."

Both were busy with their thoughts for some time, but they were interrupted by an undisputable sigh, and turned to see her eyes wide open and her gaze fixed full upon them.

"Don't be alarmed, miss," said the giant, quickly. "Those who would have done you mischief are gone, and you are with friends who will back you against all New Mexico. I'm Cactus Jack, of the Mimbres, and nobody ever knew me to play the ruffian."

Evidently his voice reassured her, for the wild look in her eyes partially died out, and she made an effort to arise. He gave her his hand, and she sat upright.

"Where are they?" she asked.

"Gone somewhere; I don't know where."

"I was thrown in water—" she began, with a shudder.

"Yes, but we saw them do it, and took a hand in the game. You needn't have any further fear, for we can lick all New Mexico in a free fight."

"Tell me what has happened, please," she quietly said.

The guide obeyed, and, as he possessed a graphic power of description when fully in earnest, the story lost nothing by the telling. She made no interruptions, but sat almost like a statue, though Bozeman, with eyes naturally keen, suspected that she felt more keenly than she appeared to do.

"They intended to kill me," she said, when Cactus Jack had finished.

"They certainly did, miss."

"Did you recognize them?"

"No, they were strangers to me; but I suppose you know who they are."

"No."

"You don't?"

"No, sir."

"Then what was their motive?"

"I can not say."

"Ef you was ter tell us whar you was seized, marm," said Zeke, "it might throw some light on ther sattervation. Did you belong ter an emigrant-train?"

The girl gazed steadily into the darkness for a full minute before answering. They could not read her face in the darkness, but, to the mountaineer, she seemed like one bending under a heavy load, and he grew perplexed.

"My kind friends," she said, at length, "it may be ungrateful in me, after what you have done, but circumstances are such that I can not now tell you anything. I will frankly confess that, though I do not know who were the men who tried to drown me, I can not doubt the source of the scheme to destroy me. I know my enemy, but I can not tell you."

Cactus Jack grew amazed.

"Lord love ye, miss, I hope ye ain't afraid to trust us," he exclaimed.

"I assure you I am not, but I must remain silent just the same."

"That is not right. This outrage must not go unpunished. You have only to put us on the track and we will make those scoundrels wish they had never been born."

"They may wish so, as it is," she answered, in a voice which had a hard inflection, despite its calmness.

"Ef I size ther matter right," said Bozeman, "you intend ter take vengeance inter your own hands."

"You are right, sir."

"Don't do it, miss," cried Cactus Jack. "You are only a woman, and you need help in the work, while you can't find two better lieuten-

ants anywhere than us. Don't hesitate, but just say the word and we are in your service all the way thr ough. I don't admire a man who makes war on a wom'n, and when I take to the war-trail, I generally make the dry bones rattle."

"I thank you most sincerely, sir, but my battle is one which I can fight better than you."

She arose as she spoke and improved the arrangement of her clothing. She was wet through, but in that climate there is no danger of thus taking cold. The men watched her closely. Cactus Jack with the impatience of his fiery nature, and his companion more soberly.

"I ain't the man to chuck in my help where it ain't needed," said Jack, a little resentfully, "but I *would* like to pulverize those skunks. Really, miss, I don't see the need of all this mystery you throw about the affair."

They were standing face to face, and even then, though he had often boasted of his indifference toward women, he noticed that she was very fair to look upon, but her face was grave and her manner earnest, as she replied:

"I am sorry that I cannot explain. If it was any ordinary case, I would confide in you, even if I was compelled to refuse your aid, but, believe me, it would never do for me to tell my secret."

Zeke Bozeman saw two things plainly: first, that the girl would not tell under any condition, and secondly, that she was in a far deeper trouble than her quiet manner would indicate. Such being the case, he wished to save her from further annoyance.

"O' course we don't want ter intrude on yer private affairs, marm. Our only object was ter aid ye ef yer need it, but ye say yer don't, an' we are perfectly willin' ter abide by what yer say. Ain't that so, Jack?"

The giant hesitated for a moment; his obstinacy was struggling with better impulses, but he battled down the feeling and heartily answered:

"Certain it is so. Yes, miss, Boze has expressed the whole business and there ain't any need of further words. Act your own pleasure and we are satisfied. I hope, however, that you'll allow us to see you safely to some more civilized place than this."

"My plans are not yet fully formed, but I will remain at your camp to-night, if you are willing, and we will talk further in the morning."

They opposed her will no longer, but neither of them deemed it safe to remain near the pool, so the camp was broken and they went a mile further down the barranca. There a suitable spot was found and they prepared to pass the remainder of the night in quiet.

Both of the men needed sleep, but it would not be wise to leave the camp unguarded, so their horses were placed at the most exposed point to do picket duty. Strange guards were they, but their sagacity had been more than once tested, and no one could enter the camp without causing an alarm.

Again the guides sought their blankets, after having seen the girl comfortably situated, and were soon asleep.

The remaining hours of night soon passed, and it was broad daylight when Cactus Jack opened his eyes. As usual, he awoke with his mind perfectly clear, and his first thought was of the mysterious girl.

He looked for her but she was not visible.

The recess in which they had encamped was quiet and peaceful. Bozeman slumbered on his blankets and the horses were caressing each other in brute fashion at the entrance, but the girl was missing.

The giant strode from the recess and the barranca lay open to his gaze for half a mile in each direction. Still, it contained no sign of life, human or otherwise.

"What does it mean?"

Cactus Jack asked himself the question and then strode abruptly toward where his companion lay. As he went, his eyes became suddenly fixed upon a scratching in the sand which speedily resolved itself into words, made by a pebble, doubtless, and these words were as follows:

"Have no fear for me. I am going away alone, but I am well able to care for myself. My blessings ever rest upon you."

He was still gazing at the message when the voice of Bozeman aroused him. The elder man had awakened and was wondering why Cactus Jack was staring so steadily at the sand.

Explanations were soon made, after which came a conference. They were filled with apprehension at the thought of a feeble woman alone and unmounted on the plain, but she had rejected their proffered aid before, and, reluctantly, they decided to abandon all connection with her affairs.

"Mebbe ther case ain't so very desprit. Her home may be less than a mile away," said Bozeman.

"It may be so, though I am dubious. Let that be as it may, we will leave her alone, as she wishes, and push on to the fort."

CHAPTER III.

THE FRONTIER POST.

It lacked two hours of midday when the borderers approached the settlement of Black Bend. Nestling at an elbow of the Rio Mimbres, it lay somewhat below the level of the plain and they paused to look before going further.

The first object to meet the vision of a stranger was the flag of stars and stripes which floated from the fort before mentioned, and after that one's gaze would naturally fall on the smaller dwellings scattered in a line from east to west.

The Bend was reckoned a first class town for New Mexico, and yet it contained only about two-score cabins, small, and dingy concerns at that, and an equally meager population. All of the "city" was not visible from that point, however; its life and energy were derived from the gold dug near at hand, and in the midst of the mines was an offshot of the town proper, a place familiarly called the "Lower Bend" and inhabited only by the users of pick and cradle.

It was a place of more freedom than the main part of the town, which was kept quiet and orderly by the presence of the soldiers; for though the veteran miner has little awe for the wearers of the blue they know they are well enough in their place and possessed authority, so the Bend made it a point to glory in their government post. Fort Black, it was then called, but it has since been given a more resounding name, and by that name it is still known to the wearers of the blue.

All this the guides saw as they looked from the upper plain—the irregular fronted adobe houses, the fort, the mountains to the southwest where the gold-diggers labored, and Zeke Bozeman looked with interest because it was his first glimpse of Black Bend.

"What is that big house jest outside ther town?" the mountaineer asked.

"It is the ranch of a big-bug from the East, a pilgrim who used to be a professor in some college, they say. He came to New Mexico with his family, a year ago, to study the botany and mineralogy of the country."

"Ther what?" Bozeman asked, blankly.

"The science of plants and rocks."

The mountaineer still looked puzzled, but he said no more and allowed his gaze to wander to the more distant mountains.

"It is there they dig gold," said Cactus Jack. "If it hadn't been for the mines, the fort would never have been built."

"Are ther sojers ther gold-diggers?" Zeke asked, dryly.

"No, but they were sent here to keep away the Apaches, who were inclined to resent gold-digging near their reservation. The fort was first built, and then those miserable adobe shanties sprung up."

"Umph! Let us go on."

They advanced for a hundred yards and were passing out of an arroyo which took them to the lower plain when the sound of horses' feet was followed by a glitter of polished bayonets as a score of United States soldiers rode into view almost at their own horses' noses.

No phantoms of the prairie were they, but flesh and blood wearers of the blue, undoubtedly from Fort Black, and their martial appearance showed that even in that remote place their dignity had not been allowed to relax.

At sight of the guides, some one cried "Halt!" The little band promptly paused, curiously eyeing the strangers, while he who had spoken deliberately separated himself from the others and rode a little forward.

His uniform was that of a sergeant, and his appearance that of a veteran soldier. His hair and beard were considerably tinged with gray, but his form was still erect and massive, and he sat in his saddle as though under review by the commander-in-chief.

"Who goes there?" he stiffly asked, severely eyeing the guides.

"A pair of wild men from Apacheland, the king of the Mimbres and the grizzly-tamer from Bozeman Pass," Cactus Jack promptly answered.

The soldier looked vexed, but he was used to the extravagant language of the West, and bore it with considerable patience.

"What are your names?"

"Zeke Bozeman and Cactus Jack."

"Cactus Jack?"

"The identicle critter. Ever hear of him?"

"I have heard of a guide and scout of that name."

"I'm that man. I'm pretty well known round here by the old settlers. Ask any one from Austin to Yuma, from the City of Mexico to Deadwood, and they will tell you of Cactus Jack, the red-skins' terror, and the death-shot of the Mimbres."

The employee of United Sam hated a boaster, but he had heard so much good of the young giant that he patiently swallowed his disgust.

"Where are you last from?"

"Up there, where the Apache sleeps between raids and the vulture whets his beak 'gainst a coming feast."

The guide pointed northwest.

"Are you going to the town?"

"We reckoned we would."

Cactus Jack did not relish all this questioning,

but he always made a point of humoring men in government blue, for the reason that he believed in law and order. Moreover, both he and Zeke needed ammunition.

"You will be welcome at the fort, sir. As you are doubtless aware, the entire garrison was changed a few weeks ago, and it was only yesterday the commander told me that if I heard the scout and guide, Cactus Jack, was in town to let him know."

"He shall see the eater of raw beef and mesquite beans," the giant condescendingly said.

"What is his name?"

"Captain Albert Brigham."

"And yours?"

"Sergeant Springer, of the regular army, sir."

The speaker, sitting grimly in his saddle, seemed like a frowning statue, but, somehow, he seemed a little like Zeke Bozeman, and Jack was not over-critical.

Little more needed to be said, and the sergeant put his command in motion with systematic regularity and rode on toward the town with the guides by his side.

They talked amicably as they went, and Cactus Jack grew more and more boastful, but not one of his speeches brought a smile to the soldier's face. He was made of no mean clay, but was a soldier such as Napoleon would gladly have enlisted in his "Old Guard." If sergeant Springer's theory was correct, a soldier's duty was to fight, not laugh.

Entering the collection of houses, they went on toward the fort, but the young giant's eyes were on the largest of the adobe buildings, and the sudden appearance of a corpulent figure in the doorway brought a stentorian shout from his capacious lungs.

Then he spurred forward, paused at the door, bent and bodily lifted the fat man from his threshold to the saddle, all the while shouting a bombastic welcome.

Some of the soldiers secretly smiled. The fat man was a Dutchman named Hans Something-or-other, his house was a tavern, and they did not blame the guide for his ebullition of joy. It is well to have the good-will of those who are to cater to the demands of our stomachs.

Sergeant Springer again looked disgusted, but he systematically halted his men and awaited like a grim statue for Cactus Jack to rejoin them.

It was over at last; the guide had shaken the fat man's hands until his arms ached, hugged him with grizzly-like fervor and poured resounding eloquence into his ears—all of which was meekly borne by sagacious Hans—and then he rode back to the troop.

"Ha! Boze, old boy," he said, "did you see that? I've touched the heart of the best cook from Galveston to Prescott, and we'll live like lords. Mr. Sojer, I am ready. Lead on to the forum."

The sergeant bowed stiffly and they resumed their way.

"Fort Black" lay before them, but it was no grim and frowning fortress, no tower of strength against which cannon balls would fall in vain; only a collection of adobe buildings, plain in every way, but plentiful enough to furnish room for quarters for the officers, the barrack, hospital and store-house, while a stockade near at hand gave abiding-place to the horses.

All was neat and clean, all scrupulously systematic, but the post seemed almost a mockery. And such it would have been in civilized parts of the world, but, where it was, established only to give shelter to the men who were sent to overawe the hostile Indians, it was all-sufficient.

Such was the fort, but those who were that day to meet within its limits for the first time, little knew the strange experience the future had in store for them.

Sergeant Springer halted his little command at a respectful distance from the officers' quarters, watching each man with a hawk-like glance, and then he alighted and marched inside.

"I don't admire this overly much," said Cactus Jack, to his fellow guide. "This petty officer may be a hero and a statesman, but he piles on too much crowbar for this climate. I'd like to tutor him on the Apache plains a bit."

"Let him simmer, boyee, let him simmer," said Bozeman, placidly. "You hate a scout who slights his beesness, an' this sojer is only livin' up ter his creed."

It was logic the giant could not well dispute, and he calmly waited for Springer to reappear.

When he came he stiffly said that Captain Brigham would see them inside, adding that their horses should be properly cared for.

"Don't worry about them," said Bozeman, hastily. "They won't stir a huff. Let 'em alone till we come out, mister."

"It shall be as you say," was the prompt answer.

The guides entered the door indicated. They saw a small, scantily-furnished room with only one occupant, a handsome young man seated at a table, but he arose quickly as they entered.

"You are the scouts Cactus Jack and Zeke Bozeman, I suppose," he pleasantly said.

"That's our size," the giant answered.

"I am glad to see you; in fact, I have been wishing for the event for some time. You see the name of Cactus Jack is pretty well known along the Mimbres."

"It couldn't well be otherwise. You see, I've tramped over every foot of New Mexican soil, and even the prairie dogs bark my name when I pass."

The soldier smiled.

"Such is fame. Well, as you have suspected, I am the present commander of this post. My name is Brigham. Be seated, gentlemen, and we will talk further."

The officer had introduced himself with remarkable modesty, but both the scouts could see he was more than an ordinary man. He was young for the position he held, being less than thirty, but he looked every inch the soldier and seemed one born to command.

He had a finely rounded, erect figure, with strong arms and large hands, while the head poised easily above his broad shoulders was indicative of rare intelligence. It was the face, however, that told the most. Its deep bronze added new manliness to his undeniable good looks, and while a heavy mustache concealed his mouth it did not hide the resolute jaws or general air of resolution spread all over his face.

It was a strong, commanding face, and the gray eyes were firm and steady, but there was in them a latent look of kindness which showed that he had not forgotten to be humane in his trade of warfare.

Wild and boastful as was Cactus Jack, he felt a little awed in the presence of this strong-faced soldier, and he was shrewd enough to know he had never gained such honors as were his without real merit.

"This second gentleman is not known to me by reputation," Captain Brigham said, looking at Zeke.

"Don't call me thet, cap'n," said Bozeman, hastily. "Up in Montana, whar I stick my picket-pin, we don't hev sech things. I'm only a man, but I trust I'm a 'quar' one, an' what I lack in polish I kin make up in a tussle with ther grizzlies."

"He's my pard from the word go," added Jack; "as true a man as ever looked along a rifle-barrel and a perfect Norther in a fight."

"Good. That's the kind of men I want around Black Bend while I hold the ribbons. Are you engaged now?"

"Not any."

"Do you want work?"

"That depends on the kind."

"I suppose you have heard of the Black Masks?"

"Can't say I have. What are they?"

"A band of gold robbers who have sprung into existence near the Bend."

"Is that so?"

"No doubt of it. They have been working for the last four months, having begun operations before I took charge; but it was only half that time back that we discovered the robbers to be a regular band. Of course their game is the gold dug in the hills—there is nothing else around here to invite their cupidity. First and last, they have secured quite a sum from the miners, sometimes waylaying them, and sometimes going into their quarters. I have tried to discover their identity, but soldiers are not the proper persons to do such work, as they carry their business open to the eye wherever their buttons are seen. We have no clew as yet."

"What's your idea?"

"I can only surmise that the robbers are wholly unknown to us and live somewhere in the hills. Of course they are not Apaches, and the men of the village are not of such material, whatever their faults."

"You called 'em the Black Masks. Why was that?"

"A fancy of mine. You see, they all wear masks, and those who have met them would never recognize them afterward. They have not done any killing up to the present time, but the will is in them if I don't greatly mistake."

"We'll have to look into this, Boze," the giant said.

"Durned ef we don't. I hate a pison snake who will rob a miner or trapper o' his honest gains."

"It was for just this thing I wanted to see Cactus Jack," the captain declared. "I have settled down to the conclusion that one good scout would do more good than all my soldiers, and a handsome reward will be paid whoever brings the gang to justice."

"We are those very critters," said Cactus Jack. "It's right in my line of business, and you can trust me and Boze to ferret out the whole business. I never fail in what I undertake."

"Then you may consider yourselves in my service until you have finished a thorough trial."

"We'll do our best," said Bozeman.

"Have you a stopping-place?"

"Sartin!" cried Cactus Jack. "Old Dutch Hans and I are too good friends to have me think of another place. He keeps good feed Hans does."

"That is settled then."

"Have you any specific directions to give?"

"No; I prefer that you use your own judgment. You know a good deal more about Black Bend than I do."

"Nobody knows it better, and I will soon root out the durnation Black Masks," was the confident reply.

After some further conversation, the guide prepared to depart. Brigham followed them to the door and watched thoughtfully as they rode away.

"I believe I have secured two trump cards. The reputation of Cactus Jack is established, and if I have any skill in reading faces, Bozeman is a perfect jewel. He is more my kind of a man than his companion, for the less talk a man makes the less trouble he runs foul of."

The speaker's attention was directed to a new object as a man walked toward the door. He seemed out of place in New Mexico, for his dress was of broadcloth, but it was in keeping with his aristocratic face and slender form. His face was that of a student, although well tanned, and his form was more bent than seemed suitable to his years.

Brigham recognized him as Nathan Townsend, the owner of the ranch seen by the two guides as they approached the town, and a cordial greeting passed between the two.

"What success, to-day, sir?" the soldier asked; looking at the canvas bag in the other's hands.

"Excellent, captain. Let us go inside and I will show you some fine specimens."

They sat down at the table and Townsend poured upon it a motley collection of small stones. They were of almost every color to be found in the region, and their owner looked at them adoringly.

"Isn't that fine? Everything seemed ready for my hands, to-day, and I have specimens in that heap from which I would not part under any consideration."

"Your house must be pretty well filled, I should think," said Brigham, handling the specimens as in duty bound, but as ignorant as a boy of the proper name of any.

"I have quite a large quantity," said Townsend, smiling. "I hope they will run a railroad here before I get ready to take them East."

"Then you really intend to return?"

"Oh, yes. I am only a temporary resident in New Mexico, lured here by a desire to gather such treasures as these. When I am satisfied with my work, I shall return East with articles which will make men wonder."

"I wish you success," said the soldier, but his hand had ceased to move among the specimens, and he spoke absently.

Was it possible that the departure of the geologist would in any way affect him—that he would be more pleased to have him remain in New Mexico than to go where honors and fame would be his?

CHAPTER IV.

A LITTLE ADVENTURE.

WHEN the two guides left Captain Brigham they went straight to Dutch Hans's tavern, and were soon engaged in getting away with a good dinner, for the old fellow spread as good a table as could be found anywhere around the Mimbres.

He and Cactus Jack were good friends despite their great dissimilarity. The guide liked good eating when he was in town, and Hans liked a man who paid his bills without murmuring. Table-board costs enough in New Mexico, so that any man might be justified in "kicking," but Cactus Jack's money was poured out as freely as water when he struck any settlement.

Dinner over, the prairie men retired to their room, which overlooked the street, and sat down for a smoke.

"We don't get much rest this time," said Jack. "Those Black Masks must be hunted down right away."

"I reckon et we kin do it," Bozeman answered.

"That's just the size of it. They will find they ain't got any Eastern clams to buck against now."

"Have you any theory?"

"Not yet. We must nose around some before that comes. I incline to the captain's opinion that they must have a den in the hills, however."

"Probably they hev allies right hyar in ther town."

"Likely as not. See here, Boze, I wish I felt as easy about that girl we saw last night as I do about this case."

"Don't worry about her, boyee. She hes got a durned pile o' grit under her quiet exterior, an' I reckon she kin keer fur herself."

"Mayb', but it is no trifling matter to be left afoot in that region. What'll she do for food and drink, and what will be the result if the Apaches should light on her?"

"In the last case she would be gobbled, o' course, but I hev a feelin' that she will be all right."

"Do you suppose we shall ever see her ag'in?"

"You've got me now. We may run ag'in' her some time, an' I hope we will. I'd rayther like ter know what rumpus got her inter that diffi-

kilty. She war no female bandit, that is sartin."

"Oh! some rascal with more brains than heart was at the bottom of it. I hope she has the pluck to take satisfaction, and if she ever needs a friend, she has only to apply to Cactus Jack, the roaring tiger of the Mimbres."

Silence fell between the two, and though they remained some time at the window, nothing of consequence was seen. Black Bend was not wild and wicked like most frontier towns; the presence of the fort kept down all open violence, and it was a very rare thing to see a drunken man holding a circus in the street.

Only one saloon had the Bend, and the keeper of this was shrewd enough to know that in order to keep the good will of the commander of the fort he must say no to the man who would fill himself with liquor beyond his proper capacity.

All this did not go to show that it was a strictly perfect town. There were men there who would cut a throat for a small sum, as the presence of dead men around the post now and then showed; the Black Masks played their parts for golden gain, and it was well for people to look to themselves if they went abroad by night.

This fact was well known to the guides, but men who fight Apache warriors without a thought of danger are not prone to think of lesser dangers, and they had decided to look about the town and hills that very night.

As darkness drew near, and the heat became less oppressive, more people began to be seen, and as Jack knew the majority of them, he spoke of them to Zeke and explained the peculiarities of each.

Among the rest who passed were two young men of more than ordinary appearance. They were dressed plainly enough, and in border fashion, but their hands showed no evidence of toil. They were the sons of Nathan Townsend, and were in the West principally for the amusement the thing offered.

"They're no fools," said Bozeman, looking at them attentively. "Thar is plenty o' grit in ther carcasses."

"If you cotton to them, you ought to see their sister. Miss Marian is the prettiest girl along the Mimbres."

"Did you ever see a gal who warn't a beauty?" the mountaineer dryly asked.

"Scoff on, unbeliever, but wait till you see her. If she don't make your old heart sizzle with the fires of youth, I am no judge of anatomy."

Bozeman chuckled good-naturedly. He would as soon have thought of crying for the moon as of having his heart stirred by a woman's face, but he had all of a true man's chivalrous regard for the sex, and he was at any time ready to use hand and rifle for any one of them who might be in trouble.

An hour after nightfall, the guides went out armed as though for the war-trail, after the fashion of Black Bend, and gave the town an inspection first of all. Only in the saloon did they find anything of interest, and even there it was so small that they soon left and went beyond the cluster of huts.

"Whar now?" Bozeman asked, as they paused under a solitary tree.

"Toward the mines. It ain't likely we shall see anything of interest, but there is nothing like trying."

"We'll be likely ter break our necks in some kenyon ef we ain't keerful. Ther moon shows some signs o' comin' out, which would be a good thing."

"You ain't worth a picayune on strange ground, Boze, but never you fear. Let the portable cactus lead the way and all will be well. I know every rock in these hills."

"Tain't an hour sence you said it war a strange region ter you," retorted the elder man.

"That was an idiosyncrasy of mine, old man."

"Thar, thar; I cave. When you mouth sech durnation words as them I don't want ter argy."

They walked on fer half a mile, at the end of which time a slight diminishing of the darkness indicated that the moon would soon appear and make their progress easier.

The hills seemed deserted by all living things except themselves, and the way was wild enough to please any fancier of such scenes, though without any beauty to arouse enthusiasm. Scarcely anything except rocks and earth were to be seen. Here and there, dwarfed bushes and shrubs held a precarious existence in crevices in the cliffs, but the soil was not of fertile nature.

In many places among the rocks, the character of the place was bold and wild enough to arouse interest. Canyon-cut and cliff-surmounted, the hills made a way difficult and often dangerous to tread.

They were passing through a canyon nearly a hundred feet deep, and of precipitous sides, when a small stone suddenly fell with a dull thud on the sand at their feet.

Quickly, both looked upward, and on the top of the cliff saw a human being standing near the verge. In the darkness, it would have been

impossible to recognize him, but they felt a little surprise at seeing that he was only a boy, for boys were not common in that region.

Perhaps the distance deceived them—he might be a man of small stature—but they forgot all this as they marked his attitude. He was looking keenly toward the north, in the direction from which they had just come, and Cactus Jack was about to make a comment when the unknown turned and glided along the edge of the cliff.

"What es ther durnation critter up to?" Zeke asked.

"We will follow and discover. It is total darkness down here and he can't see us. Shoot me if I don't believe he is up to some mischief. He don't act like an honest man should."

"Thar ain't much hope fur us. He has only ter step back from ther brink ter be out o' sight, an' we couldn't climb ther rock ef ten hundred 'Faches war on our track."

Cactus Jack did not answer, but they quietly followed the canyon with the stranger far above them. He had gone but a few rods, however, before a large boulder in his path caused him to turn aside, and though they watched keenly, he did not reappear.

"We've lost him, by ther Eternal!" said Bozeman.

"I reckon that is so. He has turned back from the cliff, and our only hope is to find a way up and go for him on common ground."

"Hil look thar!"

The mountaineer pointed to the rear, and they grew more interested as they saw another man moving along the same course the first had trod. He was of larger frame and moved more rapidly, and they began to comprehend that the little drama above meant something.

Unless their judgment deceived them, the second man was following the first, and he looked so grim with his rifle carried well forward that the affair had the look of a hostile pursuit.

The guides stood in irresolution.

If they had been on the level they would have promptly followed the two strangers, to learn what was afoot, but as it was, they were undecided whether to hasten toward making an ascent, or to watch from where they were.

"See what t'other chap will do when he reaches ther bowlder," Zeke cautiously advised.

The man indicated disappeared behind the rock, as the other had done; but scarcely five seconds had elapsed when something appeared at the opposite side.

We say something, for it was an object not at first namable; but it speedily resolved itself into a sort of knot of humanity, and it had just become evident that two men were fighting, when one came near the edge and fell headlong down the canyon.

As he neared them, whirling end over end, they felt a feeling of horror, for the fall could produce but one result; but the suspense was soon over, and the doomed wretch struck with a dull thud on the sandy bottom.

Instantly fatal was the fall, of course, and yet they stared mutely at the dark heap not twenty yards away, as though expecting some new move.

Then, almost together, they again directed their gaze to the top of the cliff.

On the very brink stood the second man, peering down as though his gaze could penetrate the darkness, and they saw that he was the smaller of the two—the pursued.

One moment his form was plainly outlined against the sky, and then he drew back and disappeared from their view.

"By the Lord! this smacks of murder!" said Cactus Jack, in a subdued voice.

"One man has wiped out another, but we do not know ther cause," answered Bozeman.

"Yonder man was chasing the other, but his lips will never tell us why. Watch the cliff, Boze, while I see if I know him."

The giant knelt beside the dead man. He was mangled by the fall, as was natural, but his face had escaped serious injury, and Jack tried to find a familiar look. Luckily, he had matches in his pocket, and when he had lighted one he saw that the deceased had been a man of middle age, while his unkempt beard and strongly-marked face were suggestive of a careless, if not a lawless, life.

He was, however, a total stranger.

The guide was about to arise, when the scound of footsteps up the canyon hastened his movements. He had heard no voices, and, in the darkness, could not yet distinguish any one; but the crunching of the sand was not to be misin erpreted.

"Somebody's comin'," said Bozeman. "Shall we scoot or stand our ground?"

"I don't run for any man. I'm at their service in peace or war, but I wish we could hide, and see them unseen."

He swept a keen glance along the face of the cliff, but no recess appeared, and they quietly awaited the coming of the strangers. The encounter was not to their liking, for the men might be the Black Masks, for all they knew, and their plan was to work against that organization secretly.

They soon distinguished four men, but were

not themselves seen until the quartet was within a few feet. Then the foremost man abruptly halted.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Who the deuce are you?"

"Friends," answered Bozeman, quickly, for he knew the unceremonious greeting would anger the giant, and perhaps cause a quarrel where none was needed.

"What are you doing here?"

"Prospectin'," said Bozeman, coolly.

"What in thunder is it to you who we are, or why we are here?" Cactus Jack demanded.

"I like to know my neighbors, that's all."

"Do you belong to Black Bend?"

"We hang out at the mines, over yonder. I take it you are from the town."

"We've been there."

The two parties eyed each other closely. Evidently, each wished to "size" the other, while, on the part of the guides, at least, there was doubt and suspicion.

"What have we here?" one of the strangers suddenly asked, as he noticed the dark heap on the ground.

"A man who tried to imitate Sam Patch and got the worst of it," Jack answered.

CHAPTER V.

A FIGHT AGAINST ODDS.

THE first speaker of the strangers strode forward and bent over the dead man. He lacked the light the guide had secured, but he almost instantly uttered a cry of surprise and sprung to his feet.

"Did you see this man die?" he demanded.

"I saw him fall over the cliff."

"He never got the fall without help."

"Who in thunder said he did?—though for that matter I don't consider it a difficult feat to fall off a rock."

"He was too sure-footed for that."

"Then you knew him?" Cactus Jack said, quick.

"He was a friend of mine. Tell me how it happened."

The voice was peremptory, and the guides plainly saw that both he and his followers were staring at them with suspicion if not with hostility. One after another, each had looked at the face of the deceased and, seeming to know him well, were awaiting with stern faces for further particulars.

Cactus Jack was equally suspicious of them and his hot blood was feeling their commanding air, but he could be cool and reasonable when circumstances required.

"All we know is that two galoots had a fight on the cliff above, and one tossed the other over. The tussle was short, but it was a sweetener for this chap," he answered.

"Ha! Where is the other man?"

"Don't see him now; reckon he has pulled the picket and run. He left his mark behind though."

"This man was flung et our very feet," said Bozeman.

Then the mountaineer pushed forward and gave a comprehensive account of all that had occurred, for he was anxious to avoid trouble, if possible.

"This is a strange story," the leading stranger said, at the conclusion of the narrative.

"Strange things frequently happen."

"You say that the second person was a boy, or a man of small stature. How could he worst a hardy man of our dead comrade's size?"

"Didn't I tell yer he took him unawares?"

Bozeman was beginning to get angry. It was plain that his word was doubted, and he was not much more given to running from a quarrel than was his fellow guide.

"I don't believe the yarn!" the unknown declared. "It is altogether too thin. I think that you two killed Sturgis, by some means or other."

"I reckon you don't know us, stranger."

"But I intend to before I leave you. This man was my friend, and his death is not going unpunished. If you fellers have told the truth you have only to prove it; but unless you do this, I shall hold you accountable."

Cactus Jack grounded his rifle with a thump. "Prove it?" he shouted. "Who in tophet wants to prove it? Durn your ugly mule-head. I wouldn't go three yards to furnish you with the blockhead's whole biography. Do you take yourselves for an intelligence office? How in thunder will you hold us accountable?"

"By the right of might," retorted the stranger with equal venom.

"Where's the might?" the giant demanded.

"We are four to two."

"I don't keer a continental if you are forty. Don't try to skeer me, you durned galoot. It won't work. Mebbe you don't know me? I'm free to tell you my name, for I ain't ashamed of it. I'm Cactus Jack, the terror of the Mimbrés and the hot norther of the desert. Maybe you've heard of me."

There was a slight pause on the part of the spokesman, a movement on the part of the followers, all of which went to show they had heard of him, and then the former once more coolly said:

"Whoever you are, I believe you killed our

friend, and it ain't the way of this region to let such things go, and so we propose to look it up."

"Bah! you are either all gas or all fool. We have told the truth; but even if we lied, what are you going to do about it?"

"We propose to knock thunder out of you!" was the belligerent reply.

"Where's your drum-sticks? They are necessary to make artificial thunder. But, see here, mister, I'm tired of nonsense. I'm a man of peace, too, but if you hanker after a fight, I reckon we can oblige you. Don't hurry the funeral on our account, but let things slide as though we wa'n't here, and you'll find us hanging on by the tail when the kite goes up," observed Jack, striking his rifle barrel sharply.

It was plain to be seen that the strangers, whoever they were, meant mischief, but the guides had no visible ambition to toss lead just then. The fellows might be honest miners, but even if they were of the Black Mask band the two pards had just as soon lay back in the dressing-room and let the dance go on without them.

At the same time, they were not disposed to show the white feather. They had made fighting their trade, and the fine sense of honor of the West recoils at the thought of back-down.

"You are a noisy braggart," said the spokesman of the strangers, tartly.

"Now you don't ketch on at all. Look through a telescope and maybe you can size me. I'm a portable cactus-tree, sixty feet high, no limbs and all thorns. Come and feel of me if you don't believe it."

"My grip would break you in two."

"I can hoe a pretty straight row after I'm cut in fours. I come of a fighting family and things have to stir when we put our hands on the table."

"Why are you in these hills?"

"Because we see fit. Any further information may be had by reading the papers."

Evidently the stranger saw the folly of wasting further words, for he waved his hand to his men and they began to spread out in a way calculated to take the pair on all sides.

Zeke Bozeman smiled grimly and placed his back against the cliff, and the giant coolly followed his example.

"What do you make of them, Boze?" the latter asked.

"I suspect they are ther robbers. They ain't got ther cut o' figure thet miners carry."

"Then we had better shoot a couple of them and carve up the other two."

"Let them begin ther frolic," Bozeman advised.

The precaution adopted by the guides frustrated the scheme of the strangers, but they still faced them with four against two. They were keenly watched, however, for the partners were resolved to have the first fire if it was to be a powder-and-ball argument.

If these glances had been more widely distributed it would have been much better for our friends. Absorbed as they were in watching the men before them, they had not seen that other dusky forms were near; they did not suspect that danger menaced them from another quarter.

They would not have been so willing to give the other party the first blow had they seen the men in the shadows whisper among themselves and then lay down their rifles and uncoil lassoes from their waists.

All these movements meant danger to the guides, but they knew not of them.

Their first warning came when a noose dropped over the head of each, settled upon their shoulders and tightened as though all by one movement; and as they realized the peril and bounded like bucks the lassoes were suddenly drawn taut; jerking them headlong to the ground.

In a moment more, half a dozen men were piled upon them, as many pair of strong hands seized arms and legs, and they struggled in vain to fling off the crushing weight.

For a time it seemed as though they would succeed. Their immense strength moved the enemy upward, and once Cactus Jack gained his knees, but was beaten down again by force of numbers.

Then he managed to get one hand on his belt and draw his knife. This done, he essayed to plunge it somewhere into the mass of flesh, but his arm was held back and his purpose thwarted.

A terrible curse fell from his lips, but at that moment a revolver shot sounded not far away, and Zeke Bozeman's voice rung out on the air.

"Thar is one ther less, pard! Fight on an' don't get weary. Fight for—"

His words ended in a gurgle, but Cactus Jack wrenched one arm free and struck out with his whole power. His knife found a sheath of human flesh, the blood spurted over his hand, and one of the enemy fell back with a dying groan.

"Curse them! beat out their brains!" cried a savage voice; and then a sharp pain ran through the head of Cactus Jack, the well-known effects of a severe blow, and his senses deserted him.

A blank followed, how long, he never knew. When consciousness returned, he opened his

eyes on a new scene. He saw a rocky room, thirty feet wide and of great length, higher than any house of Black Bend, and dimly lighted by a pair of pine knots thrust in a crevice of the rock.

Near these torches were a score of men, brawny fellows, garbed as miners, with red shirts and big hats, but there was one thing not needed in digging for gold.

Over the head of each was a mask, and it was no childish affair, which covered only the face above the mouth. Instead, it looked much like a bag, for it covered the head and neck completely, with only small holes left for the eyes.

Surely, they could be none other than the Black Masks of the Mimbrés.

So interesting had been this first view, he did not at first realize that he was in an unpleasant situation, but as he naturally moved a little from the recumbent position, he discovered that his hands and feet were bound.

"Trapped, by thunder, and by the Black Masks!" was his internal comment.

Remembering Bozeman, he looked about and saw the mountaineer only a few feet away. Their eyes met, and the elder man grimaced as though in pain. The pill was certainly a bitter one for such veterans to swallow.

"A durned pretty pickle for the portable cactus," thought that unhappy individual. "I never was took in and done for in such a way before. Durned if I ain't ashamed of myself, after tramping these hills for fifteen years."

For once there was no exaggeration about him. He was a vain man in spite of his manly qualities, vain of his strength, prairie lore and cunning, and to such a man misfortune comes with full force.

All the masked men were busy talking, so Jack resolved to have a word with Bozeman before they came to prevent it. He rolled over twice and was beside his friend.

"What kind of a trail is this?"

"Ef I read it aright, them are the Black Masks. 'Tenyrate, they are ther galoots thet set enter us in ther kenyon, an' they hev got us fast."

"Where are we?"

"I don't know. They tied up my eyes arter they got me foul and trotted off fur some time, an' when we stopped it was in hyer."

"Have they confabed with you?"

"Not yet."

"What's the prospect?"

"Durned poor. They've got everything their own way, an' if they see fit ter knife us, we can't prevent it."

"If they want to do it they had better hurry. I won't stay in these strings."

The giant gave his bonds a vicious wrench, but they had been tied to stay and did not give way at all.

"I reckon thar ain't any doubt about them bein' ther Black Masks," said Bozeman.

"Not at all. We've found 'em sooner than we thought to do, and now I'd give a good deal for a chance to let go."

At that moment one of the masked men glanced over his shoulder. The sight of the guides so near together showed him that Cactus Jack had recovered his senses, and he at once arose and came forward.

"Well, my gay bantam, I see you've got your eyes open," he mockingly said.

"Meaning me? Well, I sha'n't dispute you."

"How do you like the situation now?"

"General, I'm a frank man. I don't like it, nor do I see your object in tying me up. What good will it do you?"

"It will give me a chance to avenge the death of Sturgis and our other comrades."

"Who are you fellows, anyway, and why are you in mourning?"

"I suppose you refer to our masks. Can't you guess who we are?"

"Divil a guess. Tell me, for the fun of the thing, will you?"

The man was about to answer, though there was no evidence that he intended to comply with the request, when a murmur from the men caused him to turn, and then the guides looked in wonder at a new sight.

CHAPTER VI.

ZINA.

UNSEEN by the prisoners, a new actor had appeared on the scene, and as they looked they were amazed to see a woman advancing toward them. We say a woman, but, though her form and dress was feminine, the mask which covered her face made the presumed fact a little uncertain.

The robber, however, muttered one word as he strode toward her which, low as he doubtless thought it, reached the keen ears of Cactus Jack.

"Zina!" muttered the guide. "That's what he called her, Boze, and we mustn't forget it. Treasure it up in your noddle, for we may need it later."

"Like es not she is ther captain o' ther band. See how meekly ther male tiger bows before her."

The fellow was indeed showing all the deference of a subject, while the masked woman stood erect and coldly listened to his words.

He had scarcely finished his first sentence when she made a gesture toward the prisoners, and he at once began what seemed an elaborate explanation.

"The gal is mad; that is sartain," said the keen-eyed mountain man. "Prob'ly she don't hanker arter pris'ners in ther stronghold, an' he is tryin' ter smooth ther matter over."

"Maybe they'll get up a free fight among themselves."

"More likely she will order us shot ter onct. These durned galoots ain't given ter marcy. Zina! Yas, we will remember it, and we'll remember all the voices we hear."

For several minutes the man and woman in masks conversed together, and then they advanced to within a few paces of the prisoners. Zina, as she had been called, looked at them attentively, as though to impress their faces indelibly on her memory.

"Marm," said Bozeman, with uncommon politeness, "I take it you are ther commander-in-chief of this caravan. Ef so be you are, I'd like a word with you."

"What do you want?" was the reply, in a voice unquestionably feminine, but without an inflection of pity.

"I'd mighty like these 'ere strings taken off. I'm an old trapper and guide, an' ain't used ter them. True, ther 'Paches hev tied me up now an' then, but it ain't generally did by them o' my own color."

"You are here charged with murder."

"Where am I? This 'ere is no court o' law, an' I don't see ther legality o' holdin' us. 'Sides, we ain't done no murder. Ef you refer ter ther man that tumbled off ther cliff, ther story we told your men was true es preachin'."

"Appearances are against you."

"Nevertheless, we are innocent, miss," broke in Cactus Jack. "Thar ain't a man or woman near Black Bend that can say I ever did him or her harm, while my pardner here is fresh from the mountains of Montana."

"You will not be condemned unheard. You shall have a fair trial."

"We don't know who you are, or by what right we are held."

"The right of might rules in New Mexico, sir. At Forts Black, Thorn, Selden, McRae and such places, the power of the United States troops is resistless. Move north of here and you strike the Apache territory, where they rove as lords of the prairie. Further on, the Zunis claim control, peaceful though they may be at times, and around the head-waters of the San Juan the wild Navajo is supreme. All have their places of power, and ours is here."

The fair Zina seemed ambitious of oratorical honors, but her eloquence did not move the guide.

"And who are you?" he asked.

Something like a laugh sounded from behind the mask.

"You ask too much, sir. Be content to wait and learn."

She turned abruptly away and walked toward the other robbers, followed by her right-hand man.

"Not much hope there," the giant muttered.

"We have heered her vice, which is one thing in our favor. Oh! we'll yet work our way out, even though we go a step at a time."

The mountaineer assumed a cheerfulness he did not feel. Really, he feared this wild band would find it convenient to put them out of the way before the game was ended.

"Put your wits to work, Boze; we must escape."

How this was to be done was not clear. To me, they were not closely watched, but the enemy were not far away, and even if the field had been clear, the bonds on the prisoners' arms were too strong to be broken. Before then, they had chafed such impediments away on points of rock, when in similar trouble, but no promising place was now visible.

The masked band drew together and consulted for some time. Judging from appearances, the prisoners were like millstones about their necks, and Zina, in particular, showed considerable spitefulness in her gestures toward them.

A conclusion was at last reached and the robber lieutenant—as they believed him to be—approached with half a dozen men at his heels. They loosened the thongs around the guides' ankles and then lifted them to their feet.

"Prepare to trot," the lieutenant grimly said.

"Where are we going?" demanded Cactus Jack.

"Not far enough to tire you. Don't be too inquisitive; I am not a dictionary."

"Do you s'pose we like to be treated this way?"

"That question requires mature reflection before an answer should be given. I'll let you know to-morrow."

They asked no more questions, but the fact that the lieutenant had condescended to indulge in pleasantries was slightly encouraging and they had little fear that they were going to immediate execution.

For nearly a hundred feet they went into the depths of the cave, and the light from the single

torch in the party flickered phantom-like on bleak, black walls and low roof of rock. Gradually the way widened until it was scarcely more than a passage, and then they turned abruptly to the left and entered a small cave-chamber.

It was a place not over twenty feet square, with walls, floor and roof of what seemed solid rock, while not an article of furniture was visible.

"You can camp anywhere here," said the lieutenant. "This will be your office and counting-room for the present. Men, tie up their ankles again."

"See hyar," expostulated Bozeman, "ain't you a little rough on us? Why need we be tied up like this? It ain't agreeable."

The lieutenant did not answer and their limbs were soon bound again. Two men entered with a quantity of pine branches and pair of bearskins, from which a couch was soon formed in one corner. On this the prisoners were seated.

Realizing that they would soon be left alone, they used all their arguments in an attempt to loosen the tongue of the lieutenant. Even if they were left in doubt as to what their fate was to be, they wanted to hear the fellow say who he and his companions were; but he made no satisfactory answer and soon prepared to depart.

One man was left as a guard at the door, and then the others went outside, and their footsteps soon ceased to sound on the floor.

The torch had been left in a crevice and it enabled the prisoners to see that their guard was a muscular fellow, but the mask over his head made further investigation out of the question.

Cactus Jack, however, was not disposed to lose much time before making an attempt on his faithfulness to the band.

"Pardner," he said, "can I have one word with you?"

"I reckon," was the grim reply.

"I want to get out of this."

"Possible?"

"Certain as death. Now, how am I to do it?"

"Ask me something easy."

"You can free us if you will."

"I know it."

"Well, will you do it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I am no fool. I am a member of this benevolent and charitable organization with which you find me, and our life is one of unceasing mirth, luxury and ease. Loyalty, however, is an imperative necessity, and the reward of treachery is death. I value my life at just one hundred billions in United States money, nothing less; for, without it, I should be up a stump. This being the case, loyalty is a necessary virtue with me and I will not turn traitor to the band."

The fellow showed a reflective and philosophical bent of mind not to be expected in one of his calling and was evidently in earnest; but Cactus Jack was not the man to give up tamely.

"Life is a good thing," he admitted; "but money is not to be despised."

"I don't despise it," said the robber, quickly. "I take to it so kindly that I would be willing to eat, drink and sleep in its company. Yet, it is not often in my pocket. When I put out my hand, it pulls in its head like a snail. All samee, I'll pass my hat if you'll chip in."

"Your cheerful alacrity is to be commended, but, unluckily for you, we left the cash-box at the village. Tell you what I'll do, pard; set us free and we will afterward drop a thousand dollars where you can find it."

"My terms are cash in advance."

"Cash thunder! I tell you we ain't got the dust."

"Sorry, very sorry. Still, if you had, you couldn't bribe me. I'm not that kind of a clothes-wringer."

Jack did not answer, and Bozeman took up the conversation. He clearly read the robber. He had so little conscience that he would have cut their throats for a paltry sum, but he did not care to play the traitor for an uncertainty.

Still, men are like fishes in a brook; they sometimes bite after avoiding the hook for some time; and Zeke believed no harm could come of displaying the bait.

The giant had not given up in despair; it was a far different motive which had led him to abandon the conversation.

As he lay on the bearskin, his face was toward the robber, and his hands, bound behind his back, naturally rested on the robe. While he talked, his fingers had been mechanically pulling at the tufts of hair, and it was while thus engaged that he encountered something of a very different nature.

At first he was at a loss to understand what it was, but he fumbled steadily while he talked, and, despite the position of his hands, soon had in their grasp a long-bladed knife.

When he discovered this to be really a fact, he was so surprised that he forgot to answer the robber, and only that Zeke Bozeman took up

the conversation the pause might have been suspicious.

Cactus Jack's blood began to circulate more rapidly. He held a serviceable knife in his hands, and, if nothing went wrong, he hoped to make it a stepping-stone toward escape.

The knife was his, but how was it to be used? Both Bozeman and himself were bound hand and foot, and the eyes of a wide-awake guard were upon them. How, then, was the knife to be made useful?

"I've got ter work alone," thought Cactus Jack. "I can't even take Boze into my confidence. I might kick his leg to draw his attention, but keen as he is, he would surely do something which would spoil the whole business. Can I cut my bonds unaided?"

It was a most forlorn hope, as the giant well knew, but he had pluck and patience, and he began to work carefully, even while appearing to be very much interested in what Bozeman and the guard were saying.

Getting the knife into position, he moved the blade toward the cord, but the very first attempt served to open a gash on his wrist which was not agreeable or necessary to his purpose.

He grimaced, but the robber was looking attentively at the mountaineer, who was rising high on the wings of eloquence, and Cactus Jack went grimly on.

Three or four slight gashes were made, but finally he got down to solid business, and the thongs began to weaken. Again he drew the knife blade along the way, fearful lest he should carve himself instead of the cord, but it touched the proper place, and, with a little snap, the thong gave way.

Then ensued a momentous pause. Zeke and the guard were still talking, but the latter was proving his devotion to the band, and the voice of the veteran was growing a little excited.

Cactus Jack paused to reflect. The robber sat on a boulder with his hands around his rifle, which stood between his knees. By the slightest movement in the world he could bring the weapon, or his revolvers, to bear upon them, and then both could be disposed of before they could save themselves.

Clearly some stratagem must be used, but what one would have any effect on the guard? If he could be got out of the room—but how was it to be done?

CHAPTER VII.

A BIT OF STRATEGY.

BOZEMAN grew silent and moody. He felt like giving this stubborn guard a compressed opinion of himself, but, as it was hardly advisable, he kept the peace.

"Well, pard," said Cactus Jack, once more putting his own hand to the helm, "if you won't free us, perhaps you can do a lesser favor without fracturing your conscience."

"What is it?"

"I want a drink of water."

The robber hesitated. There was water only a few yards away, but he disliked to disobey his orders to watch them without ceasing.

"I'm afraid it won't do," he said.

"Durnation! can't we wet our whistles?" snapped Zeke.

The man arose, walked to the entrance and looked down the main chamber. His comrades were all busy, and there seemed no risk in granting the request. It might be done, but what would his superiors say if they knew?

While he hesitated Cactus Jack acted. The fellow might or might not comply with their request; but it would not do to trust to possibilities.

It was the old case of a bird in the hand and a rustle in the bushes which might be a pair of birds—or a skulking coyote—and Jack was too old a hunter to neglect the visible bird.

He moved as soon as the masked man turned his head. One sweep of his knife freed his ankles, and in a twinkling more Zeke was also clear of bonds.

Cactus Jack had not waited to see what his friend would do. He remembered the robber and knew that only prompt action could prevent him from giving an alarm. This alarm must be prevented.

The man was just turning his head when a broad hand closed over his throat, the strength of a giant seemed to hurl him back and he found himself lying on his back with the eyes of Cactus Jack blazing above his own.

"Be silent!" hissed the guide, planting his knee on the robber's breast. "We'll omit the water, but you've got to play the kitten for awhile."

Bozeman moved forward and plucked the fellow's knife and revolvers from his belt. The latter weapons were two fine forty-one-caliber "bull-dogs," and, taken with the rifle before referred to, made quite an arsenal for them.

"Get the strings, old man, and bind him," continued Cactus Jack.

It was a work easily done. The mountaineer was old at the business, while the prisoner made no attempt to resist the giant.

"He must be gagged," said Zeke.

"Of course, which will necessitate the removal of his mask. Take it off, Boze!"

The head of the robber performed an angry

dance on the floor, but the old scout stripped off the mask and they saw the face of a man not older than Jack—a man who did not look so very wicked, but he certainly did seem wild and reckless—but he was a stranger to both.

It was no time to talk with him, so he was gagged and laid aside.

"Now, then," said Cactus Jack, "how are we to get out of here? Do you suppose there is more than one place of exit?"

"We kin only tell by tryin'."

"And, maybe, run onto the gang."

"We kain't stay hyer."

"No. Well, let's poke out at once. Of course, the main entrance is over where the Black Masks are, but we can't pass them unseen. If we can find a place of exit at the rear, we are all right."

They left the captive robber in the den and went on through the narrow way. Neither of them had any intention of becoming a prisoner again. They had a rifle, two revolvers and two knives, and, with these, they were prepared to make a fight if they could not avoid it.

Just how the knife to which they owed their freedom came upon the couch was not clear; but, as they had seen no sign that they had a friend in the band, it was probable it dropped from the belt of some robber.

Their long strides took them rapidly through the passage, but it narrowed abruptly and, at last, they paused where it would admit of no further progress.

Even a small boy could not have gone more than a rod further, so their hopes of an exit at the rear were dashed to the ground.

"Durn ther luck!" said Bozeman. "What shall we do now?"

"There's only one way of leaving the cave. We must pass the guards or stay in."

"How kin we pass? Ther buzzards are roostin' down thar thicker'n fleas on a yaller dog's back."

Cactus Jack scowled and stared at vacancy. He was resolved to escape, even if they had to resort to a dash, but he preferred to do the work in a quiet sort of a way. Was such a way open to them?

Nothing promising occurred to him and they walked slowly back to where the guard had been left.

"Two or three o' ther skunks o' misery have slid inter their blankets," said Zeke, "an' ef ther thing gets ter be an epidemic thar may be some hope fur us."

"We must make a hope."

"How?"

"An idea begins to surge through my noddle which will either make or break."

"What is it?"

"I propose that one of us put on this fellow's mask and walk a few yards toward the other varmints, but not far enough to be very plainly seen. Having done this, we can hail them as though something was wanted. The hail will bring one of the men to this place. When he comes, we can set gently down on him, as it were, and then wind a few strings around his carcass to keep him quiet."

"We would be durned lucky ter do it without his givin' ther alarm."

"We must risk it. Having bound him, one of us can put on his clothes and saunter back toward the crowd, but not to join them. Instead, it will be necessary to keep to the right, where all is dark, by which course they can be passed."

"But that leaves one o' us hyer," remonstrated Bozeman.

"True, but, in a short time after, he could put on the other mask and saunter along the same course, pass the crowd as the first man had done, and then both could escape from the cave."

"It can't be did."

"Why not?"

"Ther chances are all ag'in' it. 'Tain't likely we could capter ther second galoot without an alarm, an' ef we did, you don't s'pose they would let half a dozen men walk past them as you suggest, do ye?"

"Don't exaggerate on the number, Boze, for I won't agree to take more than two through. Seriously, admit it is a squeakish plan, but we have our choice between it and a dash."

"By ther Eternal, we'll try it first, an' then be ready for a dash if it fails."

The scheme looked wholly impracticable, but both of the adventurers had seen equally simple ones succeed, and they began their work.

Bozeman put on the mask erstwhile worn by the captive robber, and then boldly advanced a few paces toward the band. At least half of them were lying down or nodding in a sitting position, and though he spoke gruffly and fearlessly, he took pains not to raise his voice too loud.

"Hallo, thar!" he said.

No one gave any attention.

"I say, hallo thar!"

This time, one of the men looked around sleepily. Both the lieutenant and Zina had sought their respective apartments off the main chamber, and the robber knew some one must answer the call of the supposed guard.

"What's wanted?" he crossly asked.

"Bring another torch this way," Bozeman said.

The robber yawned, slowly arose, stretched himself, picked up a pine knot and shuffled toward the disguised guide.

"Why ther blazes didn't you look out fur sech things before this?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Ther torch they give me was no good."

The man extended the pine knot, but just as Bozeman's hand closed upon it, Cactus Jack suddenly wound his strong arms and legs about the robber and bore him to the stony floor. His hand was on the fellow's neck, making impossible any cry which might have sounded, and few men ever get out of his crushing hold sooner than he allowed them to escape.

Hardly were they down before Zeke Bozeman took a hand in the game, and in a short time the man in the mask was securely bound and gagged.

They took a look at his face, but it was a strange one, and he was at once stowed away beside his comrade.

All was then ready for the next step in the venture, and Cactus Jack put on one of the masks and sauntered down the cave. No one noticed him particularly. Such of the robbers as were not sleeping seemed to have business of their own to attend to, and the guide's confidence increased.

Keeping close watch, he walked along to the right of the party, where all was dark, and in this way passed by without causing alarm.

It was perhaps five minutes later when a second figure came along the same course, one thicker and shorter, and when it had disappeared in the shadows, both guides were on the lower side of the cave.

Bozeman had gone but a few paces further, when he encountered Cactus Jack.

"How's this for luck?" the giant asked.

"We ain't clear yet," Zeke answered.

"But we will be mighty soon. The place of exit is just ahead."

"Ain't thar a guard?"

"Thar was one, but I laid him down and put strings on his fingers and toes. Oh! it is all right, Boze, and the way to freedom is clear."

"Lead on immediate."

Cactus Jack was in equal haste, but he paused to put a rifle in the mountain man's hands.

"Here is your own shooting-stick, and here are your sixes. I've got all our weapons back."

It was a piece of good luck which only an old borderman can understand, but it was no time for words and they hastened along; the entrance was reached and passed and they were standing in a low gulch.

The moon had arisen and a silver light was over plain and mountain. Only in the places where the rocks flung shadows was there darkness, but it was in one of these places that they had emerged and there was little danger of discovery.

Cactus Jack turned to the right and they went on for several yards in silence.

"Can yer find yer way back hyer?" Zeke asked.

"You bet I can, and I'm going to do it mighty quick. In an hour I'll have Captain Brigham and his men on this ground."

"Is that ther schedule?"

"Yes."

"Then we are makin' a mistake. Ef you want ter find this gang again, you had better let me stay and watch nigh the mouth of the den. The chances are they will diskiver our escape afore long, an' ef they don't git up an' dust then, they are fools. So, ef I watch, I kin trail them down ef they skip."

There was wisdom in the suggestion, and Cactus Jack at once agreed to it. He said good-by and hastened toward the fort while Bozeman slowly retraced his steps toward the mouth of the cave.

Securing a good place a few rods away and where the shadows were deep, he sat down and waited patiently. Such a watch would have been a nervous one to an inexperienced person, but Bozeman had seen so many years of wild life that he betrayed no emotion whatever.

The moon was striding up the sky and its light seemed like liquid silver. It touched the mountain peaks caressingly, while on the other side the shadows of the rocks were almost startlingly dark and somber. In such a place a lover of the beautiful in nature could find his dreams all realized.

An hour passed, and then came Cactus Jack accompanied by Captain Brigham and two score soldiers. Their triumph seemed near at hand. The mountaineer had not seen the enemy leave the cave, and it looked as though the dreaded Black Masks were about to be captured.

The cave was entered with some caution. Even for men who make war a trade, there is no pleasure in seeking a foe in a dark, underground hole, and no man could call the defenders of Fort Black cowardly because they liked not their work.

Still, there was no danger. They entered and found the place empty. Masked queen and male followers had gone, and in a way for

which no one then there could account, but the unconsumed torches were found at one side to prove the guides' story in part.

Had it not been for that, the mysterious manner of their going might have made some of the soldiers doubt.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TOWNSEND RANCH.

THE night was well advanced when the guides and Brigham's little army neared the fort on their return. They were not coming as victors, with flying banners and the spoils of war, but very modestly, as became men who had failed in their undertaking.

Neither the mysterious "Zina" nor any other member of her band had been found.

The cave and its vicinity had been thoroughly searched, and that, too, by men of great keenness—for Bozeman and Cactus Jack were nothing less—but they could not even tell how or where the band had gone. The cave was very irregular in places, so there was nothing remarkable in the disappearance.

Only one thing seemed clear—the two guides had seen the famous "Black Masks." There was little room to doubt that. The garbs had been like theirs, and, as it was not likely Black Bend had another mystic league, the captain of the post regarded the probability as a settled fact.

Cactus Jack was annoyed at the result of the adventure, but it had served to awaken fresh interest on his part, and he reiterated his resolve to find and bring them to justice.

Captain Brigham was inclined to be well satisfied, for one step had been taken forward, and he trusted that continued watchfulness would soon bring all to light.

The power and means of the outlaws were illustrated by the fact that they had succeeded in disposing of the body of the man Sturgis before the canyon was reached. The spot where he struck when he fell from the cliff was marked by a deep furrow, but, like the man who had hurled him to his feet, he had left no mark of identity behind.

Cactus Jack and Bozeman sought their "hotel" to get a little sleep before day, and the soldiers went on to their quarters.

Captain Brigham did not undress again that night. He had business in hand for the coming day which required some preparation, and he wanted to be early astir.

Everything worked with clock-like regularity. It had been arranged to devote the forenoon to a search for the Black Masks, and the plan was conscientiously but fruitlessly carried out.

No one had expected anything more, least of all the guides. They had a veteran borderman's lack of confidence in regular soldiers—they were well enough in an open fight on a dead-level plain, but not worth a picayune where strategy, mountain work or subterfuge was in order.

"Tek your critters home, cap'n," said Bozeman, "an' leave us ter fight down ther road-agents alone."

"I think it the best way," Brigham admitted.

"Sartin it is. This must be a game o' cunnin', an' two men kin play it better nor two hundred."

So the soldier bade his allies go ahead, and himself went to his quarters to prepare for the event of the day.

Mr. Townsend, the geologist, had invited him to call at the ranch, and it was an invitation the captain had no thought of refusing. He had been there before, and always with pleasant result, and he might have said that he was drawn as by a magnet.

The ranchman was no lonely sojourner in the West. With him when he came were his sons, James and Lucas, and his daughter, Marian.

Marian was a beauty, and it was the concentrated power of her face, eyes, smile and voice that made the magnet which drew Captain Bingham to the ranch, and it was because of her, too, that he had heard with regret that the family would soon return East.

Because of her again, he made his preparations for the visit with great care. The blue uniform was brushed until his arm ached, and it was a very model young officer that finally wended his way to the Townsend home.

The building was the largest about Black Bend, surpassing even the fort, and people had laughed when it was built, but the geologist had never been accustomed to contracted quarters, and did not wish to begin then.

Bingham was soon in the presence of the family, which was composed of Mr. Townsend, distinguished-looking, gentlemanly, kind and courteous; Marian, queenly in her style of beauty, stately—so much so that many thought her proud and haughty—but tender-hearted and devoted as a daughter and sister; James and Lucas, strong and manly of form, handsome, too, as men go, and with ways which had ever made them friends.

The brothers were much alike in appearance, except that Lucas was shorter and broader-shouldered than his elder brother. This gave him a more rugged appearance, but when their abilities had been tested in a playful contest,

James's quickness proved too much for even broad shoulders.

Among the quartet peace and good-will always prevailed. Even James and Lucas were usually of one mind, and when they differed it was with a marked regard for the other's opinion.

All this served to make more pleasant the soldier's visit, but he would have been seen less frequently had it not been for Marian. The others were pleasant companions, but she—well, she filled a space in Brigham's esteem—yes, we will use the word—which he knew would turn to a mighty gulf of despair if she went away.

If she did! What was to prevent it? Townsend had announced that the family was soon going, and when the others turned their backs on Black Bend, of course Marian would go too, and he would never see her again.

He thought of all this as he sat near her, looking at her fair face as an idolator looks at his earthly god, and the thought brought a sharp pain to his heart. Was there no way to keep her at Black Bend? He could think of but one. If she was his wife she could stay, but it is a devoted woman who, with her eyes wide open, will marry a soldier, liable as he is to be at any time transferred to another post.

But, pshaw! the idea that fair Marian Townsend could by any means care for him was the wildest of all.

The family had heard of the expedition against the robbers, and the young men, in particular, were much interested.

"I suppose you have no doubt about their being the so-called Black Masks?" said James.

"None at all," answered Brigham.

"It is strange I have never seen any sign of them, for I have often been along that very vicinity."

"I trust you will not go any more, James," said Miss Townsend, nervously.

"Why not?"

"Because they are liable to kill you."

"What should I be doing meanwhile?" laughed James, stretching out his long arms.

"If they took a fancy to shoot you in the back, you would not do much of anything. You are all of you too venturesome by far. You and Lucas go out with your rifles, and father after his specimens, without a thought of danger. What if you should fall into the hands of the dreadful Apaches?"

"Couldn't you raise a rescue-party, sister mine?" Lucas banteringly asked.

"You're not worthy of it!" declared Marian, with an assumption of severity.

All smiled, but had they been able to look into the future, they would have acknowledged that, for once, at least, a woman's fears were well founded.

"You say the scouts gained no clew to the identity of the gang?" continued Lucas, addressing the soldier.

"They saw the faces of two of the men, and they will not be likely to forget them. Besides, they heard the female outlaw called Zina."

"She cannot be known in Black Bend."

"Probably not."

"Can't you and I take a hand in the game, James?"

"I'm afraid we should make poor work of it. I was never made for a detective," James lazily answered.

"How do you propose to act, captain?"

"I shall leave all to the guides for the present," Brigham answered.

"They are very sagacious, you say."

"Such is their reputation, and their looks and manner corroborate the report."

"I suppose they will leave no stone unturned."

"Such are my instructions to them."

"Then we may soon expect to see the Black Masks brought to justice. They have done a good deal of mischief around the Bend, and we shall all breathe freer when you have exterminated them. Isn't that true, Marian?"

And Lucas closed his pleasantry by winking at Brigham.

CHAPTER IX.

JAMES BECOMES A CHAMPION.

AFTER a pleasant conversation of two hours, both Mr. Townsend and James excused themselves and went away. The former could not long remain away from his treasures of rock and plants and his son had business of equal importance.

James at once took his rifle and left the ranch, but he took good care to keep out of Marian's sight.

"She would be frightened to death if she knew I was going into the hills, but I have projected this expedition and I'm not going to give it up for any rascally man or woman in mask," he muttered, as he strode away.

It was no mysterious errand he had planned—only a trip among the hills, a method of killing time to which he was very devoted.

He left the town and walked on toward the rougher ground. His knife was carried over his shoulder, but in a careless manner, for he expected to see neither red Apache nor masked

thief. If he did not meet with any adventure, it would be his first since arriving at Black Bend.

He was a strong, sensible young man of twenty-five, and though his courage had really never been tested, there was promise of plenty of it in his earnest face. There was, in fact, little false sentiment or weakness in the Townsend family, though we dare say many a practical man would place a ban on the calling of a man who lived only to collect "specimens," as the elder Townsend did.

James entered the hilly country and moved on for half a mile in a leisurely way. There was no occasion for hurry, and the warmth of the day made him feel indolent.

"I wish I could run upon one of the outlaws," he thought, as he paused at the mouth of a canyon. "There would be a spice of interest in getting ahead of those lauded guides; but, Lord love me, I wouldn't know a road-agent from a miner."

He smiled at the idea, for, since coming to New Mexico, he realized that his life was a wholly useless one and he had almost fallen into the listless contentment of the southern man who has no employment and does not want any.

For a while he stood in thought, but the neighboring shadow of the cliff looked so inviting that he finally went to its cover, lay down and was soon fast asleep.

Perhaps half an hour had passed when another person appeared in the canyon. From its upper end, a young woman came down at a steady walk, moving toward where James lay, but undoubtedly unconscious of his presence.

Had he been awake, the sight would have surprised and interested him, and for two reasons. First, the girl—she was no more than twenty—was a stranger to him; and, secondly, she was very pretty. Though not large of frame, she was so plump and well formed that she looked the picture of health—the result, it may be, of a wild mountain life—and the plain, stout dress of dark blue, the beaded Indian moccasins and the small straw hat served to increase the attractiveness of her appearance.

She seemed almost like an Indian princess; but one look was enough to prove her of pure white blood, and an observer would have been left to wonder how she chanced to be among the hills.

To all appearances, there was no such observer. James Townsend slept in the shadow of the cliff, and no other person was visible except the girl.

She advanced fearlessly, though this may have been owing in a measure to the fact that she carried a small rifle across her shoulder, and in this way passed James.

A few yards further on was the beginning of the canyon, and she was just passing the point of rock when the scene suddenly changed.

Without warning, two men darted from cover directly into her path, and one look was enough to make her pause. No ordinary rovers of the hills were they, but men of red skins and wild attire—Apache warriors, beyond a doubt.

The sight was one which might have alarmed even a man, and the girl's face changed color; but her rifle darted into position promptly, and the two red-skins paused, with the muzzle covering at least one dark breast.

Then ensued a tableau, for they halted and glared at the young woman who faced them so boldly; and, a little in the rear, James Townsend slept peacefully on, unconscious of the situation so near him.

"Attempt to come near me and you seal your own fate!" cried the girl, in a ringing voice.

One of the Apaches forced a guttural sound, which a liberal stretch of the imagination might term a laugh.

"Peace, white squaw," he said, in tolerably good English. "You make the cliffs laugh when you talk thus to an Apache warrior."

"If my rifle makes them laugh it will be to your sorrow," she retorted.

"You dare not shoot."

"You had better not test me."

"Pale-squaw, put down your short gun. The red-man laughs at it, and you will make him angry if you act like a child."

"Have no fear; I shall act like a man," she said, with perfect steadiness.

The red-skins hesitated. Brave as they were, they had a horror of fire-arms—neither of them was thus equipped—and they had no desire to risk their lives before the muzzle of the rifle. Still, they aimed to capture the girl, and they were not men to be easily turned from their purpose.

Under the circumstances they decided that strategy would be the proper course, and they were about to separate when the scene assumed a new phase.

The sound of voices had intruded on the slumber of James Townsend, and when he finally awoke, he was amazed at what he saw. Oddly enough, none of the others had seen him, and he sat up and listened until the state of affairs became clear. Then he suddenly arose, and strode forward to the side of the girl.

His appearance materially changed the situation. The girl's face brightened and the Apaches scowled at sight of another rifle, but

there was no evidence that they intended to flee.

"What is the trouble here?" James demanded in a ringing voice.

"These Indians have barred my way, and they now demand that I put down my rifle," she hurriedly said.

"Don't you do it. They mean mischief, and such rascals are never to be trusted. Apaches," he continued, addressing the warriors, "what are you doing here?"

"Why do-s the wind blow?" one of the men asked, but James could not interpret the metaphor satisfactorily.

"I am talking of you. Again I say, why are you so near the big fort?"

"The whole prairie is free to the Apaches."

"Perhaps so, but the people of the white man's race are not included in the grant. Why have you stopped the maiden?"

"She is to go to the Apaches' country," was the firm reply.

"Who says so?"

"I do, and I am the Red Tiger."

"Have you consulted the maiden in this matter?"

The red-man made a gesture of disdain.

"When the Apache forms a plan, he does not go to others to ask how they like it. His will is law. Now, he has said that the pale squaw is to go to his village and it shall be so."

Under some circumstances, the cool assurance of the Indian would have been amusing, but James knew the mettle of the red lords of the prairie, and knowing, too, that he was inexperienced in all kinds of hostile work, the future seemed to bristle with importance.

Still, he was not alarmed, and he turned to the girl, who seemed more engaged in scanning him than in trembling before the Apaches.

"I need not ask whether you want to go with these red rascals, miss, for it is plain you do not regard them in a friendly way."

"They are the enemies of all white men," she steadily answered. "If you belong near here you must be aware of that. Death would be a boon to me compared with captivity among them."

"In that case, I'll try my luck against them. I carry a rifle and they don't, so I consider myself a match for them. Ah!"

While talking, he had been watching them keenly, though secretly, and as he saw Red Tiger, as he had called himself, stealthily move his hand toward his hatchet, he raised his rifle and covered the red breast.

"Hold up, right there, my gay Apache. I've got the drop in this game, and if you try to play your cards on the sly I'll shoot you, by thunder!"

CHAPTER X.

RED TIGER SHOWS HIS TEETH.

A DISINTERESTED spectator might have thought the situation a trifle amusing—rather too much of the David and Goliath order for modern times—but James Townsend was speaking in a firm, quiet voice, and he certainly did have the advantage of weapons.

The Apaches eyed him as though taking account of stock. They were not now on the broad plain, astride a swift steed and many in number, but simply two roving warriors, on foot, almost in the town of the pale-faces, and menaced by a pair of rifles. It behooved them to go slow.

"Look!" cried the Red Tiger, suddenly; "the white man is not acting wisely. He does not know the squaw, but he would risk his life for her. This is not wise. Men should fight for gain, and not where no reward can be won."

"That may be Apache logic, but it isn't mine. I'll defend this lady to the last."

The eyes of the wild warrior glittered. He wanted the scalp of the man almost as much as he wanted the girl, but he was shrewd enough to see that it could not be easily gained. Besides, the report of the rifles might bring other pale-faces to the spot.

"Beware!" he darkly said. "You make a bad enemy when you anger Red Tiger."

"I reckon I can stand it."

"Do you still say we must give up the pale squaw?"

"Yes, sir," said James, promptly.

The warrior turned to his companion, and they spoke together in a subdued voice. So far as James was concerned, they might have shouted with all their vigor, for they used the Apache language, and it was all an unintelligible jargon to him.

"They are plotting mischief," said the girl, uneasily.

"Indian-like, they probably are, but we must contrive to baffle them. Where do you live?"

She hesitated a moment before replying.

"Half a mile away, among the hills. My father is a miner," she then said.

"At which mining-camp are you located?"

"At none, sir. We live alone in a cave."

The young man was astonished, for, even in this wild country, it seemed odd for a woman to dwell thus.

"They will follow us there," he slowly said.

"Not if I can prevent it. We do not receive many guests anyway, and such as come there

must not be of red skin. If the Apaches knew of our home, we should not be safe there one day."

Before James could answer, Red Tiger turned toward them again.

"You can have your way, white man," he said, in an even voice. "We will trouble the pale squaw no more; but an Apache does not take such things tamely, and we shall some day meet again. When we do, Red Tiger will take your scalp."

"That is fair, and I ask no more," James replied.

"Then we will go," said the red-man.

He was turning when James spoke tersely.

"Stop!" he said.

They obeyed and looked at him with stoical faces.

"I do not trust you very much, Apaches, and I must request the honor of going first myself. A few yards in that direction takes you to cover from which you can drive an arrow through my body. Let me amend the plan. Pray remain where you are until this lady and myself have gone from the canyon."

There was a sudden glitter in Red Tiger's eyes as James unfolded his plan, but it was gone by the time he finished speaking.

"An Apache never lies," was the somewhat haughty reply, "but the pale-face may again have his way. Go, and Red Tiger will wait."

He cast his bow a rod away and then sat down on the ground, folded his arms and stared hard at the western cliff. His companion followed his example, and then they looked as innocent as a pair of bowlders.

"Let us go at once," said the girl, hastily.

"They may change their minds."

There was wisdom in the idea, but as they moved off James watched the warriors narrowly.

"There is a trick somewhere in this," he said. "Do not for one minute suppose that two brawny Apache warriors would give way so tamely to an unfledged fellow like me. I penetrated their first scheme when I stopped them from seeking cover, but they have another in mind, and I suspect it is to cut off our retreat as soon as they can safely move."

"You are right," she said, quickly. "I, too, thought strange they should give way so tamely. They think they are sure of their prey and prefer to secure us by cunning."

"I don't imagine they care to secure me; it's my scalp they hanker after. If they can waylay us, they will try to shoot me and then capture you."

"We can foil them if—"

"If what?"

"If you are willing to fight."

"You remember I offered to do so before," said James, a little piqued.

"Would you shoot one of them?"

"I certainly would if they persisted in molesting me."

Then listen to my plan. Just around the bend the canyon turns sharply to the right and runs along the mountain until it lessens into a mere depression. We can reach that point in safety, by running, but if they make a straight line to intercept us they will not be far behind. Having arrived there, we can hide, but if they follow they must either be forever silenced, or else the secret of our cave refuge will be revealed to them."

The girl spoke with a firmness which showed that hers were no weak nerves, and James comprehended what was expected of him.

"It shall be so," he said. "These red hounds are mere barbarians and murderers, and further hostility ought to seal their fate if it does not."

They had almost reached the bend in the canyon, and though the Apaches sat in their old attitude, the young people prepared for prompt action.

Rounding the bend moderately, they waited for no more but ran swiftly up the canyon. James would have given aid to his fair companion, but she proved as fleet-footed as he and they ran side by side for a hundred yards, when the way changed to the rocky depression of which she had spoken.

They confidently thought they were first on the spot, but as they looked for a suitable refuge a bow-string suddenly twanged and an arrow sped toward James's breast.

He could not himself have avoided it by any means, but Providence seemed on his side. It struck his rifle-barrel and glanced harmlessly to one side, while he, looking forward, saw Red Tiger standing erect near a large bowlder to see the result of his shot.

Hot anger at once assailed the young man, and his rifle leaped to his shoulder. He was a good shot if not a veteran borderer, and the report almost instantly followed.

Red Tiger had not dreamed of such prompt action on the part of the man he had doomed to death, and the mistake was the last of his life. The bow suddenly fell from his grasp, his arms were flung upward, and then he fell forward in a heap and his blood gushed out on the bowlder in a stream.

The girl had seen what James had not—the second Apache close beside the first, and the

click of her rifle hammer followed fast on the heels of the other. Only the click, for the weapon failed to explode.

In a moment the astute savage came over the bowlder with a catlike leap. He comprehended the situation, and, with one of the dreaded rifles empty and the other useless, he resolved to win glory in a hand-to-hand conflict.

As he darted forward, knife in hand, James looked astonished, and promptly drew his revolver. He had it in his power to shoot the red buck in his tracks, but he was not sure that he wished to do it.

Not much time was given him for thought, but, under the impulse of the moment, he mapped out a novel idea. As the Apache came near he fired with so deadly aim that the ball went straight through the red hand and the knife went spinning some yards away.

Then James sprang forward, seized the warrior and endeavored to throw him to the ground.

A watch could not have ticked many times before the rash young man was devoutly wishing he could let go; for, maimed as he was, the buck settled down to his work and James found himself in the grasp of a giant.

His revolver had fallen to the ground, and when the girl picked it up and looked for a chance to use it, their rapid evolutions shut her practically out of the game.

CHAPTER XI.

"OLD PROSPECT."

DURING his residence around Black Bend, James had heard a good deal about the wild Apaches, but, as was natural with one of his years, he had always underrated the danger and seriousness of the business, until he that day found himself in the grasp of the brawny warrior.

Only for one thing, he would have been quickly worsted. While in the States he had thoroughly learned the art of wrestling, and now, though far inferior to the Apache in strength, he managed to keep his feet.

His success in that line gave him a new idea. Surely, there were scientific "locks" unknown to the Indian—he would try a few of them.

The result astonished him more than it did any one else, and as his opponent went down at the first trial, he immediately fell heavily across the body.

The shock seemed to slightly stun the buck, and James had turned his head to call for his revolver, when a dull thud made him look the other way.

A strange change had taken place in the scene. The Apache lay motionless, and at his head stood a man whose look was as strange as his appearance on the ground was unexpected.

A man old in years was he, but in stature he was no more than a boy; and an ugly hump between his shoulders destroyed all claim to beauty. Still, he looked hardy and strong, and he was glaring down on the red-skin with a face terrible in its show of anger and hostility.

Strange and uncanny as he was, James Townsend had seen him before. Some weeks previous he had been in the village one day when the odd old man stopped at a store for supplies. No one knew him, but they showed an inclination to make up in readiness what was lacking in actual knowledge, and he was liberally plied with questions.

They might have saved their breath. He evaded their questions at first, and when they began to banter him, sent back such cutting answers and glared so from his deep-set eyes that even they, bold men that they were, grew cautious and ceased their nonsense.

He went away, after paying for what he had purchased, and when they saw that his course was toward the gold hills, they had many a jest at his expense, and laughingly named him "Old Prospect."

The incident had almost faded from James's mind, but it was vividly recalled, as he saw "Old Prospect" glaring above him, and he was not long in gaining his feet.

He looked for his weapons and the girl put all into his hands.

"The danger is past," she quietly said.

"Father has dispatched the second brave."

"Your father—" he said, in confusion.

"This is he," and she pointed to the hump-back, as calmly as though he had been a model of grace and beauty.

For a moment James was amazed and confused, but the old man himself saved him from the awkwardness of an immediate reply.

"What means all this?" demanded Old Prospect, as he glared from one to the other of the young people; and his eyes still had a wild, unnatural look.

The girl glided forward and laid her hand on his arm. James saw that her touch was a soothing one, and the wild eyes began to lose their glare.

"These Apaches tried to capture me, father," she softly said, "but the gentleman came to my rescue."

"The red hounds! How dared they venture near our home?" cried the old man.

"We need have no further fear; their mischief-making is forever over."

Old Prospect looked first at the man at his feet and then to where Red Tiger lay across the bowlder. The sight seemed to please him, and he chuckled:

"Good!" he said; "very good. They would have meddled with our affairs, but their loping is now over."

"Father, have you forgotten the gentleman?"

The strange man turned his gaze upon James with almost startling quickness.

"So!" he commented. "I see. This man, I take it, was he who shot the first red-skin."

"Yes, father, and—"

"Who are you, sir?" Old Prospect abruptly asked.

James could not doubt but that he was in the presence of a man almost if not entirely insane, but it was policy to keep him in an amiable mood, and he frankly answered:

"My name is James Townsend, and I live at Black Bend, near the fort."

"What are you doing in the hills?"

"I was out for a ramble when chance made me a witness of this lady's peril, and I gave what aid I could."

The girl looked appealingly at her father, as though to implore him not to indulge in any ugly or insane freak, but some unexplainable impulse impelled him to hold out his hand as though to an old friend.

"You have done well, young man, excellently well. I thank you in the name of my daughter, Nola, and myself, and we will be pleased to see you in our cave at once. Other Apaches may chance this way and make it warm for us if we stay where we are."

James instinctively glanced at Nola, as the girl had been called, but she smiled graciously.

"I echo the invitation, sir. We have lived the lives of hermits, but I feel sure you would not be the man to betray any confidence reposed in you."

"Rest assured I will tell nothing whatever," James promptly answered, not pausing to think how much the promise implied.

"Then let us go," said Old Prospect.

"Would it not be well to get rid of the bodies of these red bucks before we leave?" James asked.

"Ay, that it would, and it is easily done. Remain where you are, you two, and I will soon dispose of them."

The strange man stooped and lifted the body of the nearest brave, rejecting the aid of the hunter, and then strode away as though he carried no more than a babe.

"Do not heed any vagary he may show," said Nola, hurriedly. "He means well and his heart is kind, but he is often mentally deranged, as is the case at present. He is harmless at all times, and I have never known him to injure a man with a white skin. For the Apaches he has an intense hatred, of which I will speak anon."

"Is it possible you two live alone in the hills?"

"Why not?"

"The life is wild and—"

"I have always been accustomed to it. The wild prairie or the wild forest is my home. I never knew a parent other than my father, but together, we have encamped on many of the rivers and mountains between Yuma and Manitoba."

The return of Old Prospect, who had cast the body of the Apache into a chasm, interrupted them, but he at once went away with all that was mortal of the redoubtable Red Tiger.

Some additional words were said, and then he once more returned and they went up the hillside together. The old man led the way, James followed and Nola walked a pace behind. He had offered his arm, but the girl declined it with a quick and, James thought, somewhat apprehensive glance toward the bunchback.

The young man was wondering greatly at all he saw. Old Prospect was a curiosity in himself, the meeting with Nola was a surprise, the fact that she claimed the deformed man as her father was more astonishing than all else; and the statement that they dwelt in a cave hinged much on the marvelous and romantic.

What would come next?

As they went on, Old Prospect kept up a running fire of comments on the audacity of the Apaches in venturing near the hills, and as Nola did not once interrupt he bade fair to soon work himself into a fever of rage.

Suddenly, however, he turned abruptly to the right and entered a thicket of pines, and Nola aroused as from deep thought.

"Our cave is just beyond, sir," she quietly said. "If you will enter, you will see the entrance."

James needed no further invitation, but pushed through the fringe of bushes followed by Nola.

The deformed man stood where a flat-faced rock was broken by a hole the size of a common door, and he waved his hand toward the darkness beyond.

"Here is our den," he cheerily said. "Enter, young man, and see how we live in the caves of the earth and the cliffs of the air."

Again he wheeled and went on, and the young people followed more moderately, Nola resting her hand lightly on James's arm to guide him through the darkness.

CHAPTER XII.

A BIT OF MYSTERY.

JAMES could not so much as see his hand before him, and, once, a recollection of the mountain outlaws flashed upon him, but he discarded the half-formed suspicion and went boldly on where Old Prospect led.

They seemed to be in a narrow passage, but after going a hundred feet a light appeared in advance and a little further progress brought them to a spacious room in the rocks.

James flashed a sweeping glance about and saw a place some forty odd feet square and nearly as high, all the work of Nature, it seemed, but the rude chairs and tables scattered here and there bespoke a more modern use of labor.

"Ha! how do you like it?" Old Prospect asked, rubbing his hands briskly together.

"You seem to have quite a home here," James answered, and he was really surprised at some things which he saw.

"We do not live like barbarians, if we are in the mountains. Many people at Black Bend are less cosily situated."

His guest thought of some of the miserable hovels of the town, dirty and vermin-infested, and echoed the assertion. There was comfort if not pomp in the home of the strange pair.

Nola put her rifle away on a shelf of rock, and then all sat down together. The chairs were not wood, but slabs of stone arranged on small boulders and covered over with bearskins or pine boughs. That which had fallen to James proved as easy as a big arm-chair, and he almost began to envy these people their comfort.

"Tell me how you get into trouble with the red thieves," said Old Prospect, suddenly.

Nola obeyed, and he listened attentively, introducing numerous exclamations as she went on.

"It's lucky both of them were killed," he said, when she finished. "We should never be safe if the Apaches knew of our cave."

"What if they should learn who killed their braves?"

"They will never even know what became of them," the hunchback chuckled. "The chasm into which I flung them will keep the secret well."

"Do you often expose yourselves to the dangers of the outer air?" James asked.

"We are out every day."

"Isn't it rash?"

"Why?"

"You run risk from the Apaches and the masked robbers, and even the miners and people of the village are none too honest."

"Why should they care for us?"

"Those two bucks seemed to care for your daughter to day," James retorted.

The man's face darkened.

"It is the way of the Apaches, and I expect to fight them to the day of my death. I always have fought them, and I hate them bitterly. Do you know they did me a bitter wrong once and that I don't know what it was?"

"How was that?" the younger man asked, a little startled by so insane a question.

"I can hardly explain, but you may as well know now that that portion of my life dating back of fifteen years ago is all a blank to me. I know that I then resided somewhere on the outskirts of civilization, but I do not know where. Moreover, I have a dim recollection of a happy home, a wife and one child—and no more. My new life, or, rather, the part which I remember, began one morning when I awoke to consciousness in the midst of a strange scene."

The narrator paused, glanced nervously round and then continued:

"Let your imagination paint a broad prairie, and in its center a ruined cabin, reduced to ashes, almost, by the fire fiend, a scene of desolation always hard to behold. It was in such a scene that I came back to life, weak, dizzy, my face covered with stiffened blood which had flowed from a cut in my head."

"Near unto death was I at that moment, but one idea came to me vividly—the Apaches had done this deed of horror and might at any moment return. As the idea struck me I staggered to my feet and looked wildly around. A few yards away a horse was cropping the green grass. I would secure him and flee to safety."

"I had started forward when a feeble cry arose from the grass at my feet. I looked down and saw an infant stretching up her arms to me. Then it flashed upon me that this was my own child, and that her mother lay dead and scalped—burned—in the ruins of the house."

"The sight maddened me and I sprang forward like a madman. I seized the child, leaped upon the back of the horse and rode away. I dimly remember driving the spurs into the horse's sides, and I know I rode like the wind. I was mad then and have little recollection of what followed. My brain was like molten lead, and I could only press the child to my breast and ride."

"Another blank followed and I came back to

life to find myself in a *motte* at the foot of a mountain. On the turf at my side the child was chasing the bars of sunlight which fell through the trees and the horse grazed a little beyond."

"We were saved, but how I never knew, nor could I ever find the fire-destroyed ranch. I searched long but vainly—in my madness I may have rode three hundred miles before my senses came back."

"But, sir, I did not intend to be so tedious. Suffice it to say, my Nola, my daughter, and I, have been all in all to each other ever since. We may or may not have living kinsmen, but we are happy in each other's love and ask for no change."

During this long narrative, the manner of the man had at times been wild and his utterance rapid, but he seemed calm and somewhat subdued at the end.

James expressed his sympathy, and then added:

"If it is a fair question, may I ask how you subsist in this wild place?"

"By digging gold. Those noisy fools who dig the stuff in the valleys below think they have laid claim to all the paying dirt, but I'll wager something none of them singly make as much as do I with my solitary pick. I do not know why I tell you this, for no other man knows my calling, but your face impels me to trust in you."

"You shall never be sorry for it," James firmly said.

"I believe you, young sir."

"You are the first outsider who has ever been in this cave," Nola said.

"We trust but few," said Old Prospect, scowling.

"Confidence like yours makes me proud, and may my arm be palsied when I forget the claims of the weak and unfortunate. No human being shall know of you from me. In return, I trust that you will allow me to come here again."

"Why not? I like your style and I'll trust you. Yes, come again when you will, but see to it that you are not followed. Nola," the miner added, turning to the girl, "watch here while I go to survey the outside world. I am not wholly at ease concerning the Apaches."

He went out, and the girl turned quickly to James.

"Of course you understand all," she said, sadly. "My father is mentally deranged, and has been ever since that dreadful night when he was wounded in the head. It may not be easy for you to separate truth from fancy in his case, but except for his occasional outbreaks of wildness, there is little but what is sane. He knows what he is about at all times, but he often gets excited where others would be calm."

Of course James promptly echoed the sentiments of the speaker. He would have been more than human if he had not. What man cares to dispute with a handsome woman who has never done him a wrong and is not likely to do so?

Still, when he looked from her to the little, deformed miner, as he came slowly back, looking more repulsive than ever, the young man could not but feel that he was a millstone on her neck. Without him, she could seek a new life and make new friends; with him, she could never be more than what she was.

Another hour passed peacefully, but James finally remembered that the day was fast speeding away, and prepared to return to his home.

He bade father and daughter good-by with a degree of regret which surprised him, but it was not the face of the old miner that floated before his eyes as he hastened along the mountain side. Instead, he saw Nola as he had last seen her in reality, and the picture was so pretty that he took no note of time until the sight of the village cabins showed him he was near home.

And none too soon, if he wished to avoid darkness on the hills, for the shadows were growing long and another night was about to fall over Black Bend.

James was hungry, and he went at once to the ranch, but not a word did he lisp of the afternoon's adventure.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLACK MASKS STRIKE.

NIGHT fell darkly over Black Bend and vicinity, and even in the heart of the small village few people were abroad. Some of the men had wandered over to the saloon kept by Dutch Hans, there to test his fire-water, but it was noticed by some of the callers that the two guides, Cactus Jack and Zeke Bozeman were not present.

They had gone out a little after dark, but whatever their mission, they kept their own counsel.

Within the fort the garrison rested as usual. Except for the men on guard, no one seemed awake. Even Captain Brigham, after a day so pleasant at the Townsend ranch, had exchanged waking thoughts for sleeping dreams, and the post was like a sleeping tiger, all claws well sheathed.

At Townsend's all was equally peaceful. The shadows hung caressingly around the building, and no sound arose to startle them away from their perch on roof, door or window.

Black Bend seemed entirely within the arms of the spirit of slumber.

Three miles away, however, there were signs of life. Only one trail led from the Bend, and that was toward the next settlement from which all supplies were received, all such supplies coming by means of rude wagons.

The "trail," as it was called, led along the banks of the Mimbres, and with the exception of about a mile, it was a firm and even road. The excepted mile was where it wound through the hills which shot out eastwardly from the mines, decreasing in size to mere bluffs where the Mimbres cut through in its southern course.

Through this place all was, of course, rough and rocky. At times the road passed across a little ravine with open land on either side, but just beyond there might be a ridge where steep banks arose on right and left.

Along this road, only a few hours after the return of James Townsend to the ranch, a "wagon-train" was slowly moving. It consisted of three prairie schooners, mustang-drawn, with one man at the head on horseback as an advance guard, three similarly mounted men at the rear, and two beside the drivers on the boxes—a force of nine in all.

It was a somewhat peculiar sight for the region, for people seldom descend on towns of New Mexico in such a fashion, but one seeing the train could not well avoid comprehending that Black Bend was about to receive a reinforcement of inhabitants.

The party entered the hills and moved slowly along. Darkness hung over the earth, and all was remarkably peaceful about the little party. Even their own movements were languid as though they had no danger to fear.

The peaceful air was deceptive, however, for without the least warning, as they were emerging from a cut in a ridge, a score of horsemen emerged from the shadows and mixed with the travelers with a quickness which was as remarkable as it was ominous.

There were those in the party who were veterans in border ways, and when their first sweeping glances howed them that the strangers all wore masks, they set it down as an indisputable fact that they were beset by robbers, and that, too, in numbers superior to their own; and they were not so ready as usual to use their rifles.

Quickly and in concert the masked men moved. Each one seemed to have some special duty assigned him, and while some seized and held the horses by the head, others covered the men of the train with their rifles and looked wickedly along the barrels.

One moment the train was in motion; the next, standing motionless and in a vividly grouped way.

"Hold up, every man here!" cried one of the masked men, sharply. "We are your friends if you will have us as such, and we mean you no harm, but if there is any shooting going on here we shall take a hand in it."

"What is wanted here?" one of the emigrants demanded.

"Booty, sir; nothing more or less. We live by our wits, and there is only one way to do it in New Mexico. Do I make myself plain?"

"Am I to understand that you are road-agents?"

"That's the exact size of it. Yes, we are road-agents, and we want your worldly goods."

"We will not be robbed," cried the emigrant, with natural indignation.

"How can you prevent it?"

The question was asked with a quiet calmness which enraged the emigrant, but he looked at the grim horsemen, who could at one movement sweep every one of the smaller party out of existence, and knew they were helpless. Even his own head was covered by two rifles.

"See here, stranger, ain't this a little rough?" he remonstrated.

"I suppose it is, but we can't let such things interfere with our business."

"If you go through those wagons, you rob me and my friends of every dollar we have in the world."

"That is rough on the mourners, but I can't help it."

The man meant that he would not help it, but his victim chose to be deaf to the fact and launched into a torrent of eloquence. He pleaded his case well, but it was like talking to a rock and the man in mask at last became impatient.

He called on such of his followers as were not busy to go through the wagons, and the work of robbery was soon going on. It was a very diversified load, taken all in all, but the robbers grew disgusted as they proceeded. They could not carry away household furniture, and that seemed to be the most numerous article of loading.

Still, they had not expected much, and they kept on, tossing aside such articles as pleased their fancy, and afterward binding them preparatory to moving.

In the meanwhile, a scene of more than or-

dinary interest was transpiring a few rods away.

When the masked band made its swoop, there was one of the party who did not enter the gully at all. This person halted in the road, a little further on toward Black Bend, but it was not cowardice which prevented a mixing in the drama.

Unlike the others, this individual wore the dress of a woman, and though the face was concealed by a mask, the form was such as to leave no doubt but that such was really her sex.

This, too, explained why she stood back when the men ambushed themselves in the gully.

After that she waited impatiently for the coming of their prey, and when they did come, as interestedly for the sound of fighting.

None came, and it was evident the emigrants did not intend to resist.

A few minutes passed, and then the watcher saw a single figure gliding toward her, moving from the direction of the gully. At first she thought it was one of the band, but when it came nearer she was astute enough to judge from its suspicious movements that such was not the fact.

"It is one of the men of the train," she quickly thought. "He has escaped from the band unseen, and is hurrying toward the fort for help. He must be stopped!"

She had no doubt but that her suspicions were correct, nor did the fact that she was only a woman give her a moment's hesitation. She felt fully capable of coping with a single man.

Consequently, she drew a revolver and stepped into the middle of the trail, so the unknown man suddenly had the entertaining view of a grim six-shooter presented to his gaze.

He halted abruptly, and seemed for a moment disconcerted, but his hand then dropped toward his belt.

"Hold!" said the masked woman, sharply. "This is a peace convention, and we don't want any shooting. Keep your hands where they are and you are all right, but if you try to draw a weapon you sign your own death-warrant."

The stranger, of whom nothing could be told in the darkness, except that he was of rather small size, looked at his enemy with more composure than might have been expected.

"This is strange talk from a woman," he said, in a voice which seemed a little peculiar; but the peculiarity would have soon resolved itself into a faint suspicion of foreign accent. "Do you not see that I am fleeing from danger? My party is attacked by outlaws, and I am going for aid."

"And for just that reason I have stopped you," she tersely said.

"What? Surely, you do not mean that you are leagued with yonder robbers?"

"I mean just that. Yes, sir; I am one of the band, and that is why I thus block your way."

CHAPTER XIV.

MONSIEUR DUPAGE.

THE fugitive manifested a degree of surprise at this address which indicated that he might be a new-comer in New Mexico, but his anger quickly subordinated all other emotions.

"*Sacre!*" he cried, with an unmistakable French accent, "your impudence is refreshing. You may be a member of yonder gang for all I know, but that does not give you a right to block my way, as you express it. Step aside and let me pass."

"Bah! You do not know me, my gay emigrant, or you would not talk that way. You can't pass."

"Beware! I have no time to lose, and I may forget that you are a woman."

The masked woman laughed unmusically.

"Make believe I am not. What would you do if I was a man?"

"Shoot you!" he cried, hotly.

"Try it, and I will blow out your brains. Hold there! Don't make a move toward your weapons or I will plant a lump of lead in your body."

The emigrant allowed his hand to fall to his side. He read the mettle of this female road-agent and knew that he would surely invite his doom to try to use his own revolver. Still, he was not subdued in spirit, and he glared at her savagely. He had hoped to bring aid to the imperiled trainmen, but all his plans were swaying in space.

"You shall bitterly repent this act," he snarled.

"Rubbish! Why will you talk that way? I know you are a tenderfoot, but that is no reason why we should waste words. When people quarrel, of course the conquered one wants revenge. That he will get it if he can, goes without saying. Keep your powder to yourself, sir emigrant."

During this address the man had been staring straight at the masked woman. It could not be her personal appearance which so interested him, for her disguise made all that uncertain, but he appeared to be more interested than at any previous stage of the interview.

"Woman," he said, abruptly, as she finished, "who are you?"

"What is that to you?"

"If you are one certain person, much; if you

are any other one of all the world's women, nothing."

"And who is that one?" she curtly asked.

"In Houston county they called her Brenda," was the steady reply.

The masked woman reeled back with a startled cry and her pistol-hand fell by her side. She seemed alarmed, amazed and filled with consternation, and for a moment she was as weak as a child.

It was an opening the emigrant was not slow to improve. He bounded forward, and in a moment had wrenched the weapon from her hand. She stood before him helpless, the situation materially changed, but she seemed oblivious to all save one thing.

"You!" she gasped, "who are you that knows so much?"

"One who would not have thought this of your father's daughter."

"You do well to reproach me, but I do not know who you are. The darkness hides your face."

She spoke huskily, but with some evidence of returning composure.

"It is not necessary that you should know me. Let it suffice that I am your friend."

"Your voice is familiar—"

"Why study upon it? This is no time for idle words. Yonder cutthroats—Are they your friends?"

The masked woman had recovered her courage and the curt manner of the stranger aroused her anger. She answered as tersely as he had questioned, and in a defiant tone.

"They are my friends—what then?"

"Simply that I am grieved to find you so situated. Brenda, once you were innocent and loved. What has wrought this change?"

The stranger's voice trembled a little, but the masked woman bitterly answered:

"Man!"

"Man?" echoed the other, with a start.

"Ay, even so. Are you not proud to belong to the sex—proud to be one of those lords of creation who win hearts only to break them?"

The stranger put his hand to his throat as though suffocating. Perhaps shadows of his own past floated before him at that moment, but the masked woman was not so forgetful of the present. She sprang forward, hoping to again secure her revolver, but, instead, found the muzzle pressed against her temple.

"Not so fast, my lady," said the unknown. "You must not think me a child. I am your master, though you may be an outlaw queen."

She retreated suddenly, but, flashing a look toward the southern trail, saw that the little scene there was to all appearance about to end. This mysterious man could not bring aid in time to do him any good, so, as she somehow felt a disinclination to bring the outlaws upon him, he might as well go.

"You have said that you wish to go to Black Bend. The way is clear; why do you not go?"

The man looked at her keenly for a moment in silence, and his astute brain was doubtless busy.

"I will go," he then said, "although I hate to leave you here. The Brenda whom I once knew is fitted for something better than this life, but I shall probably get into trouble by pausing to tell her so. Therefore, I will bid you good-night."

The sight of men moving toward them from the scenes of robbery had somewhat hastened his going, and he glided past the woman at a quick pace, merely watching to see that she did not attempt any act of hostility.

He was quite safe, however, for her only anxiety was to see him go. Who he was, she did not know, but he held a secret of her past life which she had hoped she had forever left behind her, and, under the impulse of the moment, safety seemed granted her when he went.

For his own part, he was so filled with amazement as he ran lightly along the trail, that he was hardly conscious of where he was going. He had not thought to see the strange woman near Black Bend, or, indeed, in New Mexico, and it may be the encounter had awakened other emotions besides surprise.

Whatever the exact direction of his thoughts, he ran rapidly for half a mile, and only stopped when a deep bass voice sounded a command in plain English.

"Halt, there!"

The man paused with startling quickness, and looking up, saw two powerful men seated on their horses in his very path. These men were Cactus Jack and Jake Bozeman; but not knowing them, the fugitive seemed alarmed afresh.

"Who in thunder are you?" Cactus Jack demanded, trying to size the stranger.

"I am an honest man, monsieur, and on my way to Black Bend."

"You don't belong there."

"No, sir."

"Then where do you hail from?"

"Can I trust you?"

"Certain you can. Come, spunk up, my little man, and don't be afraid. You're with those that won't harm you or see harm done

you if you are true blue, and you don't seem like a road-agent."

"Who are you?" the man suddenly asked.

"Who? Well, Cactus Jack is what they call me. What of it?"

"Nothing, except that you are just the man I would like to see. There is trouble over yonder."

"What kind?"

"A train attacked by robbers."

"Hail are they the Black Masks?"

"I think so; at any rate, they wear masks over their faces."

"To the rescue, Bozel!" the giant exclaimed.

"We have struck a trail, and, by the Lord, we'll make fur fly. Pard, what is your name?"

The last question was addressed to the man who had brought the news, and he promptly answered:

"Jean Dupage, monsieur."

"Good! I'll see you at the village. Come on, Zeke!"

There was a simultaneous rush, a clatter of horses' feet, and the guides swept away toward the bluff. Dupage, as the man had called himself, looked after them steadily.

"It is not likely they will find anything, and I hope they will not, unless she is out of harm's way. Merciful heavens! what evil fate has driven her to be what she is? I had hoped she was happier than I."

Monsieur Dupage remained motionless for some time, but he finally aroused, and moved on toward the village.

CHAPTER XV.

A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT.

MEANWHILE, Cactus Jack and his friend were galloping rapidly toward the scene of robbery. They had been abroad on an errand no more definite than to look the country over, but the encounter with Dupage had aroused them and they were anxious to have a hand in the game.

"Their gang must be the Black Masks," said Zeke Bozeman, as they hastened on.

"Looks like it," the giant tersely answered.

"Hyer's as hopes so, anyhow, fur I want ter pay off ther old score. Thunder! you don't s'pose a Montana mountaineer kin eat crow an' relish it, do ye?"

"No more nor the wild zebra of the desert kin. Wah! I smell blood, and we'll have our fill."

There was something more than braggadocio in the mood of the guides, but as they swept forward to where they had a view of the train, the profound silence there indicated that they had come too late.

Several men were talking in a group and Cactus Jack dashed to their side.

"Where are they?" he demanded, in a deep base.

"Where are the audacious Thracians?"

"Where's who?" one of the strangers blankly asked.

"The Black Masks—the robbers."

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Off among the rocks. I don't know any more. Are you from the village?"

"Yes."

"Well, you've come too late. The robbers have been through us, stolen all our valuables and, maybe, worse. One of our number, a Frenchman named Dupage, is missing."

The guide hastened to assure them of the safety of the man in question, and then he asked some questions in regard to the direction the outlaws had taken and he and Bozeman went away in hot haste.

It looked like a wild-goose chase and so it proved, for, at the end of half an hour, they halted their horses and looked at each other crossly.

"We may as well give it up," said Cactus Jack. "The moon will be up soon, and, of course, the gang will manage to get to cover before then."

"Oh! you kin bet they're housed now," said the mountaineer. "They ain't any fools and we are beat."

"Durn the luck!" cried the giant, angrily. "Are we to be fooled with in this way? Is the buccaneer of the Mimbres to be bamboozled by a pack of sneaking kitchen-thieves?"

"Looks like it," grunted Bozeman.

"If I was steam, I should bust, I'm so mad," the younger man continued; "but I'm made of good stuff and I'm dangerous when my mad is up. I'll get even with these critters and make the Mimbres run red with gore. You hear me?"

"I hear you talk," Bozeman admitted.

"There's always some fire where you see a big smoke. Come with me."

The giant turned his horse and, followed by Zeke, rode on through canyons and gullies until an elevated ridge was reached. Near at hand they dismounted and, leaving their horses, went to the top.

The moon had arisen and, from their post, they could see the country for many miles around. The dark, gold hills lay at one side and the plain and river, the former dotted by the fort and village, directly opposite; but all seemed quiet and calm.

"What do you expect ter see?" Bozeman asked.

"Nothing. I came to study nature and see if I could get a glimpse at the Black Masks. See anybody, Boze?"

"Nary one."

Cactus Jack stood leaning on his rifle, one foot raised on a rock, and gazed steadily out on the plain. The scene was a fine one and, boisterous borderman that he was, he fully appreciated it.

Bozeman, more practical by far, helped himself to a liberal chew of tobacco and looked more nonchalantly.

Suddenly, Jack's attention became riveted on an object that was more than senseless rock and earth.

Across the plain, going from the hills and toward the north, and along a course midway between the fort and the river, four horsemen were riding at a leisurely trot. At that distance, nothing could be seen which would show positively what they were, but the guide felt sure they were not Indians.

Ordinarily, the sight would not have given him any suspicions, for they might be miners, soldiers or citizens of Black Bend; but with the knowledge that the outlaws had been abroad it struck him it would be well to watch them a little further.

He called Bozeman's attention, and then they looked together.

"I've an idea," said Zeke.

"What is it?"

"D'ye see they are leadin' right fur Townsend's ranch?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"I reckon they are all right. They may be ther two boys an' some men o' theirs. Either that or they are venturin' on private property."

"Probably they will soon swerve to one side."

They looked again for a minute or so, and then Cactus Jack grasped Zeke's arm.

"Hal! do you see that?"

"What?"

"Somebody is following them! Do you see that single person, on foot, who is trotting along in the rear? He ain't one on 'em, either; he is playing the spy."

This theory struck Bozeman forcibly. He could plainly see the man who was running after the horseman, and, if his eyes did not deceive him, he was making use of every tree and rock in the course to avoid being seen by the larger party.

The guides were somewhat mystified. Had they known that Apache warriors had been so lately seen in the vicinity, they might have explained the matter by supposing pursued and pursuer to be of red skin, but they were without that clue.

"Boze," said the giant, suddenly, "I believe I can size that single critter a trifle."

"What is he?"

"Do you observe how peculiar his clothes look?"

"They don't look so dark-colored as t'other fellers."

"Zactly, old man. Well, I opine that he is one of Uncle Sam's blue-coats. What say?"

"Shouldn't wonder a bit. But see hyar, ef he is a scjor, who are them other chaps?"

Jack did not answer. Just then the four horsemen entered a little grove of trees, and the fact that they were getting strangely near to Townsend's ranch, struck the young giant so forcibly that he forgot to reply.

The pursuer was then seen to quicken his pace, as though afraid of losing sight of them, and in a moment more he would have been in the bushes.

Suddenly, however, he paused, and then another man came forth from the trees and confronted him. At first sight it looked as though they might be allies, and the watchers would not have been surprised to see them turn and go on together; but instead, they stood still and seemed to be talking earnestly.

"Quite a panorama," Cactus Jack commented, but a vague suspicion was beginning to enter Bozeman's mind and he did not answer.

Perhaps three minutes passed, during which time the two strangers had not moved, and then he who had just come forth from the bushes suddenly raised his hand and pointed it toward the other, and a slight, brief flash followed the motion.

Both of the guides were shrewd enough to understand the act. Though too far away to hear any report, they knew a revolver had been presented and fired.

"Ho! t'other feller is down!" Bozeman cried.

The exclamation was natural. The man who had, undoubtedly, so unexpectedly become a target for a murderous hand, reeled back from the flash, staggered and fell to the ground.

The sight was painfully interesting, and the guides did not speak as they saw the would-be assassin stride forward and bend over his victim. The pause which ensued left no doubt but that the shot had been fatal. If the man lived he would make some resistance, but he lay like a rock, and the assassin's work seemed well done.

Cactus Jack aroused with a start.

"By the Lord Harry, there has been murder done. Did you see it, Boze? One man has shot down another in cold blood, and by my life, I'm going to look into it. Come, old man, get your horse and let us go. Such things are getting too common around Black Bend, and our hands are needed in the game. Come on!"

And without pausing for an answer, the excitable young giant dashed away.

CHAPTER XVI.

ONE MYSTERY LEADS TO ANOTHER.

The guides soon reached their houses, mounted and rode away in a course as near direct as the way would allow. They used all possible haste in their movements, too, for they were anxious to reach the scene of the late tragedy. In their feelings was none of the shrinking excitement with which a novice meets such scenes, but they were anxious to seek revenge for the fallen man.

In ten minutes they left the hills behind them, and then they started forward at a gallop. Their course lay over a level plain and the moon lighted all, but, from where they were, only the roof of the Townsend ranch could be seen.

Closer quarters must be gained before they could see the scene of the tragedy.

They went at a hard gallop and the intervening space was soon traversed. As they neared the grove they looked anxiously for some sign of life.

"Ther assassin hes gone," said Bozeman.

"Yes, but where is his victim?"

"I don't see ther carcass."

"Nor I. It is not on the plain. Where, then, is he?"

"Ther galoot that killed him has dragged it inter ther trees; you'll find it thar," Bozeman confidently said.

A little further advance took them to where the shooting had occurred, but there was no sign of a body. Still, as the mountaineer had said, it might be in the grove, and they centered their attention upon the bushes.

It was no dense, dark place where wild beasts of various kinds might be lying in wait; only a small and insignificant collection of mesquites; and they at once rode around it to see if all was clear beyond.

"Nary sign o' life," Zeke commented.

"The body must be in the mesquites."

"So I reckon."

"Then we will find it; but, Boze, where are the other men gone?"

The old mountaineer glanced at the Townsend house, now only a short distance away, and rolled his tobacco slowly in his mouth before he replied:

"Eyther they went in thar," he then said, or else they shied off sharp an' sudden."

"It was the last, of course; they would not go to the house of old Townsend."

Cactus Jack leaped down and, drawing his revolver, entered the bushes. Bozeman, watching the four points of compass, waited patiently and worked his tobacco with regularity.

At the end of ten minutes the giant reappeared.

"What luck?" Bozeman asked.

"Not an iota. There ain't a man, dead or alive, in that grove. I'll swear to it!"

"Then whar in thunder is ther carcass?"

"You say."

Bozeman glanced at the house and then at the river, fifty yards distant on his left.

"Let us first make sure thar was a carcass," he said. "A man with a bullet through him must bleed more or less, an' thar should be blood on ther sand ef we saw aright."

There was no disputing this, and they once more rode around the grove. It was not so easy to locate the spot where the shooting had occurred, but after some search they found just what they had expected.

On the sand, looking dark and terrible in the bright light, was a pool of red fluid which could be nothing less than blood. Much of it had soaked into the sand, but a good deal remained above the firm soil.

"Where has he been taken?" Cactus Jack demanded.

"Do you want my opinion?"

"Certain."

"Wal, I reckon we had better drop ther matter right hyer until mornin'. Murder has been did an' ther carcass got away with—mebbe by hidin' in ther house, mebbe by buryin' in ther motte; but, most likely, by means o' ther river. Ef we go ahead now, we're bound ter fall short o' success an' spile all our chances fur ther morrer. We had better rest on our oars."

There was reason in what he said, as Cactus Jack well knew, for, even then, they might be trampling out valuable signs with their feet; and they promptly withdrew from the immediate vicinity of the grove, though the giant was not yet ready to leave the ranch alone.

"I ain't sure but we ought to wake up Townsend's folks," he said.

"Why so?"

"There may be prowlers in there. If those first four men were of the masked band, they had an object in coming so near the house.

Again, having come so near, where did they go so suddenly?"

"That was easy; ther plain is wide."

"Again, who was the man who stepped out and confronted the man who followed them?"

"Now you have me."

"If such a thing was possible, I should say there was a receptacle for stolen goods in or near the house, that the masked men came here to hide what they had stolen, that one of them shot whoever had pursued. So far I can reason clearly; but now, where is the dead man, and where the quartet of horsemen?"

"You've got me. Wait until to morrer, an' I'll tell ye more."

"So I will wait, but this place must be watched all night. There must be no unseen going or coming from Townsend's. We will do the watching, or you may ride to the fort and call on Captain Brigham for aid."

"I reckon we kin do all that is necessary," Bozeman said, promptly following his partner's lead. "Long as ther weed lasts I won't kick."

No further words were necessary. They were men to act promptly when once their minds were made up, and in a short time they had gone into camp, as it were, almost under the windows of Townsend's. There was not likely to be much more underhand work in the vicinity that night.

The close watch they maintained satisfied them on one point. Whatever had been previously done near the ranch that night, the actors in the drama had done their work and gone. The moon, though not bright enough for trailing, would have revealed any moving object, and they were satisfied that no such thing crossed the plain, or came or went from the house.

Day dawned at last. They had waited patiently, and even scouted a little in the gloom preceding the dawn, but when it became light enough for their purpose they threw off all symptoms of languor and went to work systematically.

Retracing their steps they found where the four riders had approached the grove, the footprints of their horses being plain enough on the sand. Not so with the unknown man who had followed them. The firmness of the sand prevented the least sign of a track, but this was of no importance at that point.

Next, they went to where he fell. There, the red stain was still plain to be seen, and the fact that the sand was not disturbed indicated that he had made no struggle. Doubtless the shot had been instantly fatal.

"Now, whar did they kerry him!" Bozeman said.

It was an important question, but one not easy to answer, as they soon found to their annoyance. Except for the tracks of the horses, no footprints were visible on the sand. Not the least sign was visible to show the course in which the assassin had come forth from the bushes to meet his victim.

They passed beyond the grove and followed the horse tracks until they were led to the rear of Townsend's house. There the animals had been halted and, evidently, for several minutes, for the earth was stamped into ridges and hollows.

All this was plain enough, but fresh inquiries began to arise in the minds of the guides. As yet, these self-interrogatories had not been given speech; they both preferred to wait a little.

Probably the horses had stood for ten minutes, and, from the spot, their subsequent trail led away due north. It was followed until the increased length of their strides indicated that the quartet had really gone, and that, too, with little hope for the pursuers to learn more, and then the latter turned and plied each other with questions.

Who composed the mysterious quartet, why were they solate abroad, and who was the man who had followed them? According to their theory the first party had been of the Black Mask band and their pursuer, a soldier, but, if so, there was still a good deal of doubt.

Again, who had been the single man who came forth from the grove and shot the pursuer, where was the body of the latter, and why had the mysterious horseman gone near Townsend's at all—more than that, why had they halted under the very walls of the house, when a chance observer from within might have seen more than they would have been willing to have known?

CHAPTER XVII.

SEEKING FOR A CLEW.

THE guides looked into each other's eyes at the end of a summary of the affair in a manner which spoke more than their tongues had uttered. A little more thought and reasoning seemed likely to reveal more than they cared to unearth alone.

"Boze," said Cactus Jack, gravely, "I reckon we had better call on Cap'n Brigham and let him take charge of this affair. It is getting too deep for us."

"An' it are about time fur them ter be up."

The mountaineer pointed to Townsend's.

"Yes, unless they did without sleep last night."

"Why should they?"

"You say, Boze."

Again the pair looked each other squarely in the face, but Zeke soon turned his gaze toward where the stars and stripes floated over the fort.

"I reckon we had better go thar," he said.

The idea was at once acted upon, and it was not long before they were closeted with the captain. He had been still sleeping when they arrived, but he was soon out of bed and listening to their story.

They told all freely, forbearing to make any comments, and it was plain from his manner that he did not catch at any suspicion.

"There is a good deal of mystery about the affair," he slowly said, when they had finished, "but one point can soon be settled. I will see if any of my men are missing."

He went to the door and spoke to Sergeant Springer, and that systematic warrior was soon engaged in marshaling his host.

"It is unlucky that you could not have watched them at the same time you was riding to the rescue," said the soldier, with a nonchalance the prairie men did not feel, "but I think we shall find it was only a quarrel of some sort among roughs."

It was a very plausible theory, but when the sergeant had assembled his men it was found that one was missing. Private Roger Woodman did not answer to his name.

Captain Brigham was surprised and Sergeant Springer was dumfounded. It had always been his boast that he could put his hand on every one of his men by day or night, but here he was clearly shown that one, at least, had been absent for several hours unknown to him.

The truth was soon learned—the missing man had gone out the previous evening on some trivial errand, and such of his comrades as had known of his absence had not dared mention it to their superiors.

Matters began to assume form; the guides believed a soldier had been shot near the grave, and Woodman's prolonged absence was certainly singular.

Captain Brigham became at once the energetic soldier. He ordered out half of his men, and, disregarding the claims of his stomach, was soon in the saddle and riding toward Townsend's. He wanted to look the scene over and in some way, discover just who had been the victim of the night's tragedy.

The guides took him over the whole ground and explained all the movements of the several parties carefully, and Brigham saw and listened, but did not seem to gain any idea therefrom.

In the midst of it all, the front door of Townsend's house opened and a young man walked moderately toward them. Brigham saw him with pleasure, for he was Lucas, the younger son of the ranchman, and he might be able to throw some light on the subject.

He made a rather fine appearance as he strode gracefully forward, for he had a good form and face, and, like all the Townsends, was intelligent and frank of manner; and the genial smile on his face showed that he did not know anything was amiss.

"Hallo, Brigham," he said, pleasantly, "what has brought you out so early? Are the Apaches on the war-path?"

"I haven't seen any? Have you?"

"Not a red."

"Did you hear anything unusual last night?"

"No. Why? Has anything strange occurred?"

Lucas glanced toward the village as though he expected to see it in ruins, but all seemed as on the previous day.

Brigham began at the beginning and told the whole story. It was a narrative which naturally surprised the young man, for he found it hard to believe that such things could occur right under his window, as it were, and he knew nothing about it.

"By George! they were bold!" he commented, angrily. "It is a little too steep for even this wild land. But wait; I'll call father and James and see if they heard the pistol shot or saw the men."

The idea was so good that the entire household was soon interviewed, but the searchers might have spared themselves their trouble. No light was thrown upon the affair.

With a barely perceptible sourness visible on their faces, the guides took up the matter where they had left it. All this delay had done them no good, and it was plain that the unraveling of the mystery depended on them.

First of all, they desired to find the body of the man who had been shot. That it was in the river seemed probable; that it had been carried away on the back of a horse was possible. Whichever way it went, the assassin had acted promptly, and the fact that no blood was found upon the sand at any point except the exact one where he was shot, was proof that his enemies had been shrewd enough to stop the dropping of the life-fluid.

With Cactus Jack and Zeke at their head, the party went first to the river, but not a sign was found there to indicate that it had been used to cover the corpse of the murdered man. The

search was thorough, and at the end the guides expressed the opinion that the solution of the mystery lay toward the north, whether the unknown horsemen had ultimately gone.

"What do you make of the affair, anyway?" Lucas Townsend abruptly asked. "I am interested, for we are not willing that our ranch should be thus used."

"Decidedly not," said James, "and, since we have been forced into it, we want to take an active part. To begin with, do you think a man was really murdered, and, if so, was he the missing soldier?"

He looked full at Cactus Jack as he asked the question.

"Beyond a doubt murder was done," the guide quietly answered, "and I have no doubt but that it was the soldier who fell. My theory is that he chanced upon four of the Black Masks, who were laden with their booty, and followed to learn more."

"An' I'arned too much," added Bozeman.

"But who was the man who came out of the bushes and shot him?" Lucas asked.

"That is the subject for study," the giant said.

"Well, I do not see that we are progressing any by standing here," said Brigham, impatiently. "Let us get to work on this mystery at once."

"You chaps may do as you choose," said Zeke Bozeman, "but me an' my pard are goin' ter foller ther trail. Come, Cactus Jack; let's be goin'."

The mountaineer spoke with energy and his friend at once fell into line. They said good-by somewhat abruptly to the others, and setting their horses' heads toward the north, galloped off, ostensibly to lift the trail.

When they had gone a hundred yards, however, Cactus Jack turned and looked his companion full in the face.

"Boze," said he, "you have an object in this."

"Sart'in I hev," the mountaineer answered.

"I mean, beyond what you said to them. What more is there?"

"I wanted ter get you away from them chaps afore you said too much."

"Too much? What do you mean?"

"I mean that we are on ther trail, boyee!"

Bozeman spoke with emphasis, but his grim old face told little, and Cactus Jack added:

"You will have to explain."

"You suspect more than you hev told. It is easy ter state what I suspect. Fust of all, I allow them four riders were Black Masks, an' then I allow it was ther sojer thet follered them. Now, who shot him?"

"Say it yourself, old man."

"Why was they ridin' so nigh Townsends? Thar was danger thar ef they was seen an' they knowed it, so why did they go thar? I'll tell yer. It was because they had an ally in ther house."

"Thunder!" said Cactus Jack, but he did not seem so very much surprised.

"They went thar because they had an ally thar, but whether it was ter give him their plunder or not I can't say. Would they have halted their hosses under ther very wall ef all had ben aboveboard?"

"If your theory is right, one or all of the Townsends must be in league with the Black Masks."

"That's ther size on't."

"Can it be?"

"Why not?"

"They seem frank, square and honest, and they are certainly well-to-do."

"Still, you think jest es I do."

"I admit it, Boze."

"Another thing. Do you remember that when ther unknown man come out o' ther bushes, his future victim allowed him ter talk tamely to him fur some leetle time?"

"Yes."

"Waal, it follers that ther murdered man knowed his assassin an' believed him honest, else why did he not take measures ter insure his own safety at fust sight o' ther critter?"

"Go on."

"I consait that ther man who come from ther bushes was either James or Lucas Townsend, an' that he come es an ally o' ther robbers. The soldier knowed him an' thought him squar', so he was able ter shoot him down in cold blood 'cordin' ter programme."

"I see now why you didn't want me to talk before the other men," said Cactus Jack.

"You don't dispute what I have stated."

"No, because I think there lies the headquarters of the robbers of Black Bend."

And the giant leveled his finger toward Townsend's.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WARNING.

As might be expected, nothing came of the efforts of Captain Brigham and his fellow soldiers. Work like that in which they had just engaged was not in their line of business, and the leader finally decided that his best course was to march back to the fort and await the return of Cactus Jack and Bozeman.

By this time he was beginning to feel the

need of breakfast, but when he arrived at the fort he found new claimants for his attention.

The emigrants, after being thoroughly cleaned out by the robbers, had been allowed to go their way unharmed. They soon reached the village, gave the alarm, brought out Brigham's men only to cause a wild-goose chase, and then, it is to be charitably supposed, they went to bed.

But, thus early in the morning, they were again astir, and Brigham found them anxiously desiring aid of all imaginable kinds—food, work, money and the like. He heard them all with patience; gave food and advice liberally, and then, at last, happily rid of them, sat down to care for himself.

One man of the party had not applied for aid. This was Jean Dupage, who had escaped being robbed and still seemed tolerably well supplied with funds. He had secured quarters at Dutch Hans's hotel, and saying little to any one, kept his sharp, black eyes open to all that transpired around him.

A shrewd, self-capable man was the little Frenchman, and from the way he critically examined all the real estate in the town, the landlord soon came to the conclusion that he was a man of means who had thoughts of investing some of his capital.

One peculiarity the stranger had which was not exactly to his credit. The female sex was not largely represented at Black Bend, and many of those who were there were not in any degree comely, but Monsieur Dupage seemed deeply interested in all and managed to get a look at what faces he saw on the street.

"Mine gracious!" Dutch Hans observed to his bartender, "ish der man looking for a wife, or vat ish der matter mit him?"

"I take it he is a crank," was the terse answer.

Both of these opinions covered a good deal of ground, but the Frenchman gave no clew to his motives, and, so quietly did he act, no one except the two men before mentioned suspected that he was interested in the female population of the town.

Later in the day, he was requested to appear before Captain Brigham and tell what he knew about the late robbery. Cactus Jack and Bozeman, having found an end to their trail at the river's bank two miles above the fort, had returned unsuccessful, and it was they who suggested that monsieur be called.

He threw no light on the subject, but it may here be stated as a somewhat singular fact that he made no mention of his encounter with the female outlaw. The fact may have escaped his memory, but a little reflection by one acquainted with the case would awaken a suspicion that he was keeping a portion of the truth back from some hidden motive.

Ignorant of all this, Brigham and the guides were favorably impressed by the man, and he went away after having established a good reputation.

The officer was a good deal worried at the complicated state of affairs. Instead of easily unearthing the Black Masks, as he had hoped to do, matters had grown much worse, and only the confident manner of the guides kept him from feeling discouraged.

Cactus Jack and Bozeman went back to their quarters to get a little needed sleep. Before retiring, they discussed the situation and mutually decided that an investigation might lead to embarrassing results. No doubt existed in their minds but that some one inside of Townsend's knew more about the outlaws than was to their credit, and the fact that Captain Brigham was interested in Miss Marian led them to wonder if he would really like to see the matter sifted out if it was to lead to the implication of any member of the household.

It was decided that they had better keep their suspicions to themselves for a time, and with this resolution they sought their couches.

Night was near at hand when they awoke, but they then paid their respects to one of Dutch Hans's suppers and prepared to go out on a tour of observation.

While lingering in conversation with the bartender, their attention was attracted to the remarks of two men who were having a *tete-a-tete* at a table near by.

"Ef I hadn't anything else to do," said one of them, "I would try ter find out who the gal was. I s'pose it is all right fur the young feller ter keep her shut up som'ers, ef he an' she are agreed, but I reckon a man might make a dollar out o' the case."

"In what way?" the other man asked.

"Why, you see the young feller is rich an' proud, and he don't want his family ter know this part o' his business. Old Townsend would rave like a mad bull ef he knowed it. Consequently, Mister James would pay a price ter hev the matter kept dark."

"Ain't you jumping to conclusions? The mere fact that you saw James talking with a gal who is a stranger in Black Bend don't prove that she is his property. She may be the darter o' some out-o'-town settler."

"Mebbe, but I don't think it. They acted secret-like, as though they had something to hide, an' the young feller scowled at me mighty black when I passed as though she was too good to be looked at."

All these remarks were heard by the guides who at once grew interested. Under ordinary circumstances they might have thought nothing of the matter, but the fact that James Townsend was holding secret interviews with a woman unknown about Black Bend now led them to remember the female outlaw they had seen at the cave, and it was very easy to form a connection between the two.

Cactus Jack was so strongly impressed by the idea that they had struck a clew that he at once committed an indiscretion. Impulsively turning upon the men, he invited them to drink at his expense—an invitation they did not refuse—and then he rashly asked more about the affair of which they had spoken.

The result was to be expected. The men were willing to drink, early and often, with the handsome giant, but when it came to divulging their secrets for his benefit, it was quite another matter.

Briefly, the guide was baffled. They made light of the matter at first, and then showed some temper, so that Cactus Jack was soon brought to see that he could not be a partner in their secret.

Really, however, there was little lost, for they had overheard all the men knew, and they decided when once more outside that it was about as well.

"But," said the giant, emphatically, "it goes as another link in the chain. I think I see clearly. The girl they saw was the same one we met at the cave, and, such being the case, James Townsend is, of course, an ally, if not an active member, of the gang. Probably he was telling her all he knew about last night's adventure."

"How much did he know?" Bozeman significantly asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you s'pose he knows who shot their sojer?"

"Possibly."

"You remember our theory that their sojer knowed ther man who come out o' ther bushes ter meet him. Now, James admitted that he knowed ther sojer, which makes me think he may have be'n ther man who did ther shootin'."

Cactus Jack did not answer at once. He was a man who, in spite of the wild life he had led, had a profound veneration for family ties, and he felt most reluctant to bring sorrow to the inmates of Townsend's house. The aged father and the fair sister would mourn for their wayward relative; and the guide asked himself if it would not be well to abandon the work then and there.

He wavered for but a moment. In his opinion, justice and the right should at all times be regarded, and the fact that James was rich, respected, and an outward gentleman, must not be allowed to shield him.

The investigation must go on.

That evening the guides did not remain long outside. After what had occurred, it was not likely the Black Masks would make any move so soon, and, besides, the partners had decided that silent and cunning work would be more likely to succeed than hap-hazard searching.

They went back to their room and sat down to smoke. Like most frequenters of wild regions, they found this their chief enjoyment, and in the clouds of smoke they sent upward they tried to find some clew to lead them from their dilemma.

In the midst of their enjoyment, Jack chanced to glance at the bed at the further side of the room, and there he saw something which at first looked like a handkerchief. Wondering at the fact, he arose and went forward, and then he saw that it was a folded white paper.

"I reckon the chambermaid has took to writing me letters," he grimly said, as he opened it and saw writing upon it.

His smile faded, however, as he read, and then he whistled softly and tossed the document to Bozeman.

"Read," he briefly said.

"I pass," said the mountaineer; "I can't tell one letter from another. What does ther talk-in' paper say?"

"Well, it is plainly addressed to you and me, and then follows this epistle:

"You are probably aware that in trying to unmask the robbers of Black Bend you are daring the revenge of desperate men; but, as you do not know who they are, or how carefully concealed are their tracks, I take this way to tell you that unless you look well to your safety, your trail will lead you to your death. I do not bid you turn back, for I, too, would see them destroyed with pleasure; but I bid you to beware of secret as well as open enemies, of blows in the dark, and counterplots of various kinds. Would you know who thus warns you? Remember the girl you saved from death in the barranca, and know that I am not ungrateful for what you then did. Be warned in time, and save yourself."

Cactus Jack read this remarkable communication fluently to the end, and then, lowering his hands, looked quietly at Bozeman. Both men were calmer than might have been expected, but they were surprised and perplexed.

"Wal, that is int'restin'," Bozeman dryly observed.

"What do you make of it?"

"Durned ef I kin tell. It may be on ther squar' an' it may not be. Ef it is a false sign, then it was writ ter scare us away."

"But, Boze, how should any other human being know that we rescued a girl in the barranca, except the girl herself?"

"Correct."

"Do you know my idea?"

"No."

"It may be absurd, but I can't get over the idea that the female outlaw may be the girl of the barranca affair. I believe this note was written by the girl we rescued, but how could she know of our present occupation, or of the make-up of the Black Masks, unless she was one the band?"

"That are is logic," and Bozeman nodded his head emphatically.

"Boiled down, it amcunts to just this: She wants to save our skins, so she takes this way to warn us against 'secret enemies,' as she terms it. That means James Townsend, you see. She is faithful to him and would call no names, but she wants us to hang on to this world for a while longer."

"Wal, do you intend ter c'lar out?"

"Do I?" said the giant, forcibly. "Not ef I have my say! When I run from red-man or white, I won't claim to be the simoom of the Mimbres any more. No; I won't run!"

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE TWILIGHT.

CAPTAIN BRIGHAM was a good deal worried by the ill success which had thus far attended their efforts to solve the mystery of his dominion. He was a man who meant to do his duty, who had a large share of commendable ambition, and he hoped in time to be something more than a captain of an insignificant fort in a Western wild—remote, friendless, slow.

Somebody has said that nothing succeeds like success, and the soldier knew that he must either root out the outlaws or run the risk of being rooted out of his present office. Consequently, he was resolved to find and defeat them.

As Woodman, the missing soldier, continued absent, all had accepted it as a settled fact that he had been the victim of the previous night's tragedy, and Brigham was a good deal troubled at the situation.

Such being the case, and finding an evening before him which bade fair to hang heavily on his hands, he grew delighted when he thought of a way to break the monotony of affairs.

The way was one to which many men have been addicted. Brigham proposed to call on the woman he loved.

Accordingly, as the day drew near its end, he made a careful toilet and wended his way toward Townsend's house. Perhaps his lucky star was burning brightly—at any rate, much to his delight, he found on his arrival that all the male members of the family had taken themselves off on other business and left Marian alone.

If appearances went for anything, she was glad to see him, and they were soon seated and engaged in conversation. Beginning on minor matters, they finally spoke of the late tragedy, and then, as that was not a pleasant topic, branched off in other directions, talking as young people do.

Brigham was happy, as every young man, soldier or otherwise, would have been under the circumstances; but, realizing that the extent of his happiness depended on the length of time he had Miss Marian to himself, he finally suggested a stroll outside the house, not mentioning the fact that his object was to avoid her male relatives.

They went, and in the delicious southern twilight wandered about in agreeable conversation.

For a time Brigham was wholly absorbed in what his fair companion was saying, but, anon, his thoughts began to wander. He loved Miss Townsend, as he had freely confessed to himself, and the proposed return of the party East, had showed him that he must soon learn her own sentiments on the subject or leave them forever unknown.

Just then he did not consider the difference in their worldly stations. She was a rich man's daughter; he, a poor soldier; but the determination to speak came so suddenly that he did not then remember this fact.

He must speak at all hazards.

It was an important moment in the young officer's life, but details need not be given here. Except to the interested parties, love-making is dry business at the best, and though Brigham presented his case with at least an average amount of eloquence, a summary will satisfy the reader better than a detailed account.

All the soldier's doubts were soon swept away. Marian listened to his avowal with a promising silence, and when her turn came to speak her words were such as made him happy. Secretly she had admired and loved him from the first, and now she said so without hesitation.

And so, in the twilight, their future was settled so far as they had power over it. At that moment neither of them remembered the obstacles which might soon arise in their paths. If Marian went East, or Brigham was trans-

ferred to another post, it would be a severe blow at the best, but they were living then for the present.

Two hours longer they wandered about, never going far from the house, but the soldier finally remembered that others besides themselves were to be considered, and they said good-night at the door.

He walked back to his quarters in a happy mood, far happier than he had known for some time. "They never come but once, those nights," a talented author has said, and it was no wonder Brigham seemed to walk on air.

Meanwhile Marian was lingering where her two brothers were talking of the recent mystery, but she scarcely heard what they were saying. Men might come and go, and blood be spilled on the very door-stone of the ranch, but that did not change the fact that she and Brigham had come to an understanding.

Feeling too happy to remain and listen to what had become dry discussion, she started for her own room, breaking into a faint singing when once free from other glances.

She was about entering her room when she was accosted by Molly, the colored servant who had followed their fortunes from the East and who liked New Mexico because it was warm like the land of her birth. She was fat and forty, though scarcely fair, but as she stopped the girl her eyes seemed even too large for her broad face.

"Miss Marian," she said, in a tragic whisper, "I's have don' got suffin' to show 'em."

"Another of father's scorpions at liberty?" questioned Miss Townsend, carelessly.

"Not dat, but—but—come dis way, chile."

Somewhat interested, Marian followed and was led to a small den used as a store-room. It was not needed for the family, and there were to be seen numerous cases of the elder Townsend's "specimens,"—rocks, plants, and things once crawling but now speared like so many salmon fish; and at one side Molly paused.

"Do you see dat board, honey?" she asked, pointing to the floor.

"Do you mean the short one?"

"Yes, de one dat was fitted in where de odders did not reach. Wal, Miss Marian, I was up here a bit ago, an' when I step on dat board by chance it flew up at dis end, so, an' den—"

Molly ceased speaking and illustrated. She placed her heavy foot on the short board and it once more tipped from place, revealing the usual nook underneath where a flooring separates an upper and lower room.

"See what is dar," said the negress, in a whisper.

Marian bent down and saw some sort of a garment. Surprised, she raised it from the nook and advanced a step toward the light held by Molly.

Then she paused suddenly and, gradually, a white, scared look crept into her face.

The garment she held was a coat of blue color and in places glittered the brass buttons she had always seen when passing the fort. The cloth—the "army blue" no one could mistake—and the buttons made one thing certain; she held a coat which had been made for the United States army.

It was not that which made her turn so pale, however. Upon the breast of the coat, plainly visible even by the dim light, were dark stains which terrified her; and as though to add to the feeling, as she stood silent, Molly put out her hand and showed a small, round hole in the coat at the left breast.

Even these women knew it to be the track of a bullet.

Across Marian's mind flashed a recollection of the disappearance and supposed murder of Woodman, the soldier, and the thought came that this army-blue coat had been his. If such was the fact, how came it in their house?

There were signs enough to tell of a violent death—the hole in the breast, the dark stains, which were unquestionably of blood; but how had the coat come to the place where they found it?

She had turned to ask Molly's opinion, when she remembered the emotion the negress had shown, and upon her mind flashed a conviction which almost stunned her.

There was some one in the ranch who knew how the soldier had died, who had an interest in his death, and who had borne the coat to the house when the deed was done. So much seemed plain, but who was that person?

That it had been a woman was impossible, for she and Molly made up the list in the house. The male inmates were Townsend, James and Lucas.

No wonder Marian's face paled and her eyes grew like those of a startled deer. If appearances went for anything, one of her brothers or her father had borne the coat to the store-room and concealed it in the niche; and whoever had done it must have had a hand in the killing of the soldier.

Just then the girl dared not reason, much less remain with Molly; and she dropped the coat as though it had been poison.

"Put it back," she faintly said. "Hide it well, Molly, and for your life say not a word of what you have seen."

"Fore de Lord, Miss Marian, I is jest scared to deff. When I found it, an' saw de blood an' de holes, I jest drapped right down on de floor. I remembered de sojer dat was shot in de night, an' I knowed dis was his coat. Oh! honey, you don't know how my heart went thumpin' round like a wooden-legged man goin' down-stairs."

"Put it back, I say; put it back."

Miss Townsend did not speak sharply; she was staring at vacancy with a fixed face.

Molly silently obeyed, and then her tongue again broke loose.

"Chile," she said, "who brung dat coat here?"

Marian rallied.

"Who do you think?" she asked.

"It wasn't you or me, nor de ole massa, an' as fur de boys, dey—"

"Of course James and Lucas had no hand in the work, Molly, but you and I must keep silent forever. Do not, under any condition, mention this to my father. Will you promise?"

"I do, Miss Marian, I do. Not even de inquestion wid de rack an' stretcher kin unloose my tongue. I is dumb."

Miss Townsend knew that the negress suspected more than she intimated—she could not well do otherwise—but she could not then talk of the matter. She went at once to her room, and with her feverish head in her hand, propounded a question.

"Was James or Lucas? God help me, but one of my brothers is a murderer, or an accomplice. I know not which one; I dare not suspect; but in either case I am his sister, and my lips are sealed."

CHAPTER XX.

A TRIO OF NEW CHARACTERS.

OF course when a settlement springs up in the West, all the men who flock there do not take to gold-digging. Instead, many stay out, and not infrequently such men are those who make the most money. Miners must have supplies, in the shape of food to eat, clothes to wear, tools for their trade and so on, and the dealers who sell to them ply their trade at a rate of profit which would shock a Shylock of the caliber of the original gentleman of that name.

Dealers in liquid poison have the pole so far as trade and profit go, but their fellow "merchants" are not far from the wire when a fat purse is offered.

For some time previous to the opening of our story, one Elbridge McKey had kept a clothing store at the west end of the city. His rustic sign over the door certified that he was a merchant tailor, and the goods he sold received a degree of making and alteration in his own shop, in order to perfect them, if his word went for anything.

It was McKey himself who used the needle, and for some reason, perhaps because he was a modest man, he did his work in an inner room and let Slim Sam, his clerk, do the business over the counter.

It was the day after the events just recorded and one of those few hours when McKey was himself visible in his store. Slim Sam had gone fishing, on a watermelon raid or some other youthful expedition, and Elbridge held the fort alone.

One other man was in the store—a stout, burly fellow in a red shirt, big hat and muddy boots; an attire which indicated that he was a miner, just as his looks and actions suggested that he had crooked his elbow too often in the saloon below.

He had bought a small package, and, failing to keep up his end in conversation, was fast falling asleep in a standing posture when the door opened and a new-comer appeared.

The miner aroused and McKey looked at the visitor with an interest which turned to disgust. No customer was he likely to prove, for out of such a pyramid of dirt and rags no amount of labor could coax pay dirt.

In the middle of the floor the new-comer halted.

"How?" he genially said, putting out one hand as though McKey was expected to clasp it at a distance of twelve feet; but the merchant tailor only nodded slowly.

"I have come on biz," said the man of rags; "strickly on a matter o' biz."

"Thought you had come to have your picture taken," said McKey, with sarcasm, for it was not hard to size this whisky-marked old man.

"Not ter-day, pard, not ter-day. 'Fore I go away I may take a settin' an' fill up ther albums 'round town, but, pard," and he advanced quite near to McKey and held out one long, bony finger, "ther fact is I am now dead bu'sted."

"Must have been a terrible crash when you went to pieces."

"Put it thar, pard; you've made a center. Sir, an' you on my right hand, I am ther wreck o' a capable man. Did I say wreck? No, not that. I have lost my canvas, but ther ole ship is still sound. I am only temporarily bu'sted. Gents, I am one o' ther emigrants cleaned out by ther Black Masks."

The announcement was made with startling

emphasis, and the speaker looked from one to the other as though expecting a boom of excitement.

"A big haul they must have raised on you," sneered McKee, who plainly saw what was coming.

"Now you make a center. It was a big haul fur them an' it left me bu'sted. Ten thousand dollars I had in my pocket, an' with this sum I was goin' inter biz in Black Bend an' grow up with ther city. That was my stake."

"Well?" said McKee, patiently.

"Ther result is ther result. They stole my cash an' even rrbbed me o' my clothes, so hyer I am in these played-out tegs. It is a great fall, gents, an' none o' my friends in Siroc City ever thort ter see Old Tom Knott a bu'sted man."

"Go right on with your lecture," said the merchant tailor, while the man in the red shirt winked frequently to keep his eyes open and properly take in the narrative.

"Your encouragement does me proud. Pard. I see you b'lieve in Old Tom Knott, an' when you do it you make a center. Put it thar. Pard, I have a painful duty ter perform."

"Drive on your ambulance."

"It is hard on a capable man, but it hits me hard ter be seen in these tegs. What I now banker arter is a suit o' decent clothes."

"I knew it was coming," said McKee, placidly.

"Your keenness o' perception does yer credit. I like such menes you—we make a center every bit. Eh?"

"Well?"

"Wal," said the bu'sted man, more slowly, "ef you will stand me up fur a suit o' clothes, I'll pay you double ten days hence."

"Mr. Knott, your name is against you. I don't do business on tick, so you can Knott have the clothes. You have called according to Hoyle and you can now leave the same way. You and I can't trade. If you banker for good clothes, go to the Lower Bend and use a pick. Your yarn about ten thousand dollars won't wash, and the sooner you vamoose from here, the better. Git!"

Mr. McKee believed he had done his whole duty by allowing this dilapidated bumner to talk so long, and he now pointed to the door and spoke with considerable vigor.

But the stranger stood still and stared at him with seeming amazement.

"Who? When? Where?" he almost gasped. "Where am I? Do I dream or be I mad? This ter me? Pard, you can't mean it. You can't say this seriously ter Old Tom Knott."

"Behind you, Mr. Tom Knott, is a door. If you don't take your shadow away from it in two shakes I shall throw you into the street. You hear me?"

The merchant tailor thrust his fist forward over the counter and the bumner retreated a little, his face falling below zero, but at that moment the man in the red shirt straightened himself by the aid of the counter and came to the front.

"I'll take a hand in this yer game, I reck'," he said, in a husky voice. "I'm Bill Bush, o' ther Lower Bend, an' I'm a steam-engine on a milk-train. I'm ther Boss o' ther Bend an' a pay-dirt bank. Tom Knott, what kin ye do?"

"Do?" echoed the stranded man.

"I said it."

"I don't exactly git ther drift o' yer meanin'."

"Kin you fight?"

"Ask them down at Siroc City. Ask any graveyard in New Mexico. Ask, an' you'll larn that Old Tom Knott is an infernal machine with saltpeter."

"I want a pard," said Bill Bush, steadying himself by the counter; "I want a man ter lead me ter ther Lower Bend. I am drunk as a lizard on one leg. I've b'isted the blamed catarack stuff till I'm way-up. Kin you lead me ter ther Lower Bend?"

"Now you make a center. Kin I? Ef I can't, you may plant me whar ther buzzards sing. Put it thar!"

"Ther way es dangerous. Chasms yawn by ther way; ther Black Masks hide in ther gulches, an' ther Apaches chant ther hymns at 'arly morn. I say, kin you lead me?"

Bill Bush was winking vigorously and swaying in time, and the stranded man began to see land. He again declared his ability to perform the work, and then the boss of the Lower Bend turned to McKee.

"Give my pard a broadcloth suit, an' I'll pay ther bill. How does that strike you?"

He flung down a twenty-dollar gold-piece, and the merchant tailor promptly scooped it in. He knew Bush was acting with the folly of a drunken man, but that was none of his business as long as he sold his goods.

In a short time the trade was completed, and Tom Knott cast off his rags and put on the stout suit so easily gained. McKee suggested that a little water applied to his face would do no harm, but Bush took offense at the remark and the matter was laid on the table.

Then the new pards prepared to depart. Knott put his arm affectionately around the miner, and after some unnecessary curves they reached the door.

At that point the stranded man paused and looked back.

"I don't blame you," he said, reproachfully, "fur looks are ag'in' me, but Old Tom Knott is sound es a nut. I never was bu'sted before, an' some day you'll see me ther king-pin o' Black Bend. Put it thar!"

They went out, and after a short pause, McKee walked to the door and looked after them. The stranded man, in the glory of his new suit, was bravely striving to earn his wages, and as the pair went down the street, his arm kept Bill Bush above earth, but did not prevent a considerable amount of curving.

Such scenes were too familiar to bring a smile to McKee's lips, but as he glanced in the opposite direction he suddenly started.

"The fair Marian, by my life!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XXI.

AGAINST A SNAG.

BILL BUSH and his new partner walked away from the town with many an eccentric swerve and stumble, but the miner had faith to believe Knott would guide him safely to the Lower Bend. This place, so called, was half a mile from the fort and near two of the largest mines; but it was included in the town of Black Bend.

After leaving the cabins of the city proper, their road lay through Pleasant Canyon—a place ironically named, since it was thoroughly dismal—but the stranded man did not seem to fear the shadows and patiently steadied Bush's uncertain steps.

"You're a good feller, Tommy," declared the miner, "an' now you've tied onto me you kin make up your mind yer ill-luck is over. I'm a man o' pay-dirt with a granite foundation. I'm ther boss o' ther Lower Bend an' I'll make you a big gun afore I git done with you."

"I need a leetle backin' jist now," Knott acknowledged. "I'm dead bu'sted, an' when a man gits thrown overboard it ain't always easy to climb back."

"Don't you worry, ole man. Bill Bush is behind you in this game, an' when he takes hold thar ain't a man in New Mexico as dares to say boo."

"Boo!"

Like an echo to his last word, but with his own loud boast magnified into an ear-splitting yell, the single trio of letters was at that instant howled over his shoulder.

If the earth had opened and swallowed him up, Bill Bush could not have been more surprised and alarmed. He gave an answering yell and sprung from Knott's hold, but the effort was too much for him and he went down with his face burrowing in the sand.

Then, before he could turn, a heavy weight was placed on his back, his hands drawn together and crossed, and in a moment more he made out that some one was binding them.

It was an inglorious plight for the boss of the Lower Bend, and, a little sobered, he foamed with rage and tried to shake off the weight.

Vain attempt; but in a twinkling his hands were bound and he was rolled over on his back to see a strange and unwelcome sight.

Two new-comers had appeared on the scene and one stood over him with a drawn revolver, while the second was only a few paces away and covering the stranded man in a similar manner. Knott had not been bound, but the fact that he was weaponless showed a reason.

Both of the assailants wore black masks, and it did not take long to locate them.

"How do you like it, Bill Bush?" his conqueror grimly asked.

The miner burst into a stream of profanity and wrestled madly with his bonds.

"Let me loose!" he howled, making a noise calculated to excite a buffalo bull to jealousy. "Cuss you, let me loose or I'll have your blood fur it."

"Easy, now, William, easy," was the even reply. "You may bu'st your paddle-wheel ef you yell so loud."

"You infernal coyote, let me up an' I'll bu'st your head. I'm ther boss o' ther Lower Bend an' I kin lick you in one round."

"Bah! you can't even stand alone. Boss o' ther Bend! Why, you poor, miser'ble critter, you ain't boss o' common sense. You've filled up with rum until your brains are gone to thunder. A'lee samee, you are the fish we were layin' fur. We b'long ter ther Black Masks, an' we know you ain't spent all your dust yet."

"You're a liar an' a coward!"

"William, don't go on that way. Don't you think yourself a leetle ha'sh? My feelin's are tender an' I'm an only child."

"Tom Knott," howled the miner, "why don't you sail in? Go for them, tooth an' nail."

"Yes, Tom Knott," said the second man, mockingly, "why don't you sail in? Come right up an' git your last supper."

The revolver covered the bran new red shirt of the stranded man, but he doubled his fists and scowled fiercely.

"Give me a chance an' I'll chip in," he declared. "You've got ther drop an' I'm bu'sted, but when ther couplin's are all right you'll find Tom Knott right thar."

"Oh! you're a fightin' pair; we don't doubt that; but your claws are cut clear ter ther fetlocks. You can't bend a bow in this shoot."

"Durn a coward, anyhow! You dassn't give us a show," declared Bill Bush.

"So you've broke out ag'in. You howl like a hyena, but though your music is soothin' ter ther n'arves, I shall have ter pull ther string."

So saying, the masked man dropped by the miner's side and insinuated his hand into his pocket. Bill squirmed and stormed, but in a short time he was relieved of all the valuables in his possession, including his arms.

Then the stranded man became the focus of the Black Mask glances.

"Chip in, tenderfoot," one of them said.

"Durn your impudence, I'm no tenderfoot. I browsed in New Mexico afore you left your dad's shanty. I'm Old Tom Knott, from Siroc, an' I've seed good days, though this ain't one on 'em. Your gang went through me in ther pass an' I'm a dead bu'sted man."

"We will prove it by searchin'."

"Wade in, my gay antelope," Knott cheerfully said.

The search was made, but not even a toothpick rewarded their labor. The result naturally vexed them, but the leader speedily rallied.

"You must do somethin' fur ther good cause," he said. "Ther heathen need dust, but they also need rags. Shake off that new outfit o' yours. Your shirt an' pants will jest fit me."

The stranded man set up an indignant howl. It was hard to be robbed of the glory of his new garments, especially as the deed would leave him in a state of complete nudity, and then began an eloquent appeal.

It was cut short by the ready revolver of the robber.

"No words," he tersely said. "Strip or chew lead."

"I won't!" the stranded man shouted. "Thar ain't no garden o' Eden round hyer, an' I should be pulled in an' court martialed ef—"

The masked leader quietly thrust his revolver under the speaker's nose.

"Strip!" he shortly ordered.

"Oh, Lord!" howled the victim; "would you disgrace me forever? Durn your ugly carcass, you're meaner'n a Root Digger Injun. You would rob a blind man o' burnt beans. What! give you my outfit an' go naked? I reckon not, an' I'll see you hanged first."

"Find yer gallows-tree mighty quick then. Par! I reckon you will have to strip ther varmint while I hold ther joker under his nose."

"Let up!" snarled Bill Bush, rolling frantically in the sand. "I'll hunt yer ter your death ef you molest my pard. I'm ther boss o' ther Lower Bend an' a bad spell o' fever an' ague when I ketch hold of a man. Let up, I say!"

His threat was disregarded, and under the persuasive influence of the revolver, poor Knott finally disrobed. Hurling his newly-acquired garments on the sand, he stood before the robbers in nature's costume, a furious, but, for the time, harmless and "busted" man.

His persecutor laughed behind his mask, and, returning his revolver to his belt, stooped to pick up his clothes.

At that moment, however, a new voice broke the silence.

"Hands up, all! The man who tries to draw a six must chew lead. I mean it!"

The Black Masks wheeled in concert. They saw before them a stoutly-built, well-dressed young man, who had not the look of one accustomed to manual labor, but from the way in which he covered them with a pair of shining revolvers, there could be no doubt as to his familiarity with the weapons.

"Cut and deal again," said this young man, coolly. "Sir robbers, don't try to draw, or out go your lights. I hold the drop, and I mean business."

"Do you interfere here?" asked the masked leader, angrily, but wisely making no motion to draw.

"Apparently I do."

"O' course he does," shouted Bill Bush, from the sand. "Why shouldn't he? That's Lucas Townsend, from the Bend, an' when he draws he smashes ther target."

"Makes a center ev'ry time," added Knott, wondering if it was policy to make a dash for his clothes.

"Gentlemen," continued Lucas, for the young man was indeed he, "you are not wanted here. Vamoose!"

The robbers hesitated. With their revolvers out they would have laughed at this presumptuous young man, but they knew that while they were drawing them he could, if he was a good marksman, drop them both. Worse than that, help might at any moment arrive from the Bend.

As though in answer to the last recollection, two men at that moment appeared to view in the canyon, and they were no sooner sighted by the robbers than they wheeled and began a rapid flight.

"Fire!" shouted Bill Bush, rolling in the sand in a vain attempt to burst his bonds. "I'll give you a hundred dollars ter drop 'em. Blaze away, youngster, fur ther Lord's sake!"

CHAPTER XXII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

LUCAS TOWNSEND grew excited under the miner's appeal and sent two shots whizzing down the canyon after the robbers, but the lead spent its venom on the air and the Black Masks disappeared among the rocks just as the two men before mentioned came up with rapid steps.

"What's the riot, pards?" demanded one of them, and Lucas recognized Cactus Jack and Bozeman.

"Another outrage from the Black Masks," he said, in explanation; but the words were scarcely out of his mouth when the guides bounded away in pursuit.

Already Tom Knott was dressing, but he paused with one foot in the air preparatory to a dive in his most essential garment.

"Good Lord! they won't ketch them," he said. "I'm a stranger round hyer, but I kin see that them rocks ain't ther place ter find nothin'."

Meanwhile, Lucas was liberating the miner, who at once gained his feet and attempted to join in the pursuit, but not far had he gone before his treacherous legs gave out and he sprawled again on the sand.

"Is he wounded?" Lucas asked.

"Wounded with whisky; hit plum'-center," Knott answered, diving into his shirt. "Whisper it low, though, fur me an' him are pards. Durn it, young feller, you kin at jest ther right time, fur we was dead bu'sted."

"Bu'sted!" echoed Bill Bush. "I'm wuss than bu'sted. Ther infarnal dogs hev got my money an' my weapons. Yes, I'm bu'sted, but I'm ther boss o' ther Lower Bend an' I'll make ther Black Masks smoke afore ther fire dies out."

"The Black Masks!" echoed Lucas, starting.

"Were they indeed of that band?"

"Sartin they was. Oh! tarnal thunder, young feller, why didn't you shoot?" demanded Bush.

"I ought to; I wish now that I had; but, to tell the truth, this is my first experience in such an affair and I was not sure I could hold the drop when I secured it. A couple of shots, well aimed, would have thinned out the outlaws and given us sight at two faces."

Just then Cactus Jack and Bozeman returned from their fruitless chase. The robbers had evaded them in the devious courses among the rocks, but they wanted light.

An explanation was given, Bill Bush doing most of the talking, and though he had suffered severely from the event it was plain that the arrival of aid had prevented any personal violence and—saved Tom Knott's new garments.

The guides took it coolly; so much so that Bill Bush accused them of want of sympathy, but he cooled down anon and accepted their offer to see him and the stranded man safely to the Lower Bend.

They went away together, and at the same time Lucas turned the other way and hurried home. As he went he kept close watch at the sides of the canyon, for it was possible the robbers had not gone far, and if they were hovering near their wrath would naturally be directed toward his precious head.

No enemy appeared, however, and it was not long before he reached the remoter cabins of the Bend proper. In so doing, he innocently interrupted a couple of persons well known to him; for one was his sister, Marian, and the other Elbridge McKey.

The brother's face clouded, for, despite the bland exterior of the merchant tailor, he did not like him.

Evidently the interruption was not unwelcome to Marian, and Lucas read as much in the way she greeted him, though McKey's face settled into a sourness it did not lose while the trio remained together.

This was not long, for the girl plainly told Lucas that she wanted to see him at the house, and when McKey's store was reached he said good-day and went inside.

"Isn't he horrid?" demanded Miss Townsend, who had not forgotten the expressions of her younger days.

"Do you think so?" Lucas asked.

"Haven't I told you so before?"

"It strikes me you have," he dryly admitted.

"Doubtless you also remember that I agree with you. But why were you walking with him?"

"Not because I wanted to, you may be sure. He saw me from his store when I went out for a stroll, and forced his company upon me. I would have given him a plain invitation to keep away, but for your sake I resigned myself to the affliction like a martyr."

"For my sake?" echoed Lucas, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you advise me, only last week, to treat him well?"

Lucas laughed and then grew grave.

"Don't throw too much responsibility on my shoulders, sister mine, for I don't feel worthy of it. Father suggested that, as McKey was one of the foremost men of the Bend, it would

be well to keep his good will while we remain here, and I echoed his idea; but I frankly said then, and I say now, that I don't like the man. However, let us use him civilly, and if that won't content him, tell the fellow to keep his distance."

"He follows me like a shadow," complained the girl.

"I'll break his neck if he gets too familiar."

"Mercy!" cried Marian, "what are you talking about, you horrid boy? I'll endure him a thousand times rather than to have trouble. There is already enough of that about the Bend. Where do you suppose the missing soldier is, Lucas?"

She had suddenly remembered the night tragedy and the blood-stained coat she had found under the floor. She sprung the question on her brother with equal quickness, but his face only grew grave.

"That is a mystery I wish I could solve, Marian. It annoys me that it should occur right under our walls, as it were, for such tragedies always leave their imprint. A house in which a murder has been committed is ever after a branded place, and people will not soon forget this midnight mystery."

"And then there is something more."

"What is that?"

"People may suspect the Black Masks have a friend inside our ranch."

"Such a suspicion can have no foundation. Ordinarily, I would not boast, but we are not a family to sympathize with robbers and assassins. I suggested to Brigham that we have our house searched, but he laughed at the idea."

His manner made Marian's heart feel lighter, and for a moment she forgot the tell-tale coat of blue. Lucas, at least, was good and noble, and he little knew why she caressed his hand as they walked.

"Perhaps, after all," she thought, anon, "the coat may have been brought inside the house by some one not known to any of us."

They reached their home, and found Mr. Townsend earnestly searching for something beneath the window.

"Prospecting for gold, father?" Lucas cheerily asked.

"I have met with a severe loss," said the scientific man, as he straightened up and brushed the hair back from the pale, broad forehead. "An hour ago I captured a very large spider, and having brought him inside the house, left him on the window-sill, with a pin through his back, while I made a few notes. This done, I looked around for my prize, but, lo! he was gone."

"Did he fall out of the window?" Marian asked, for, though cordially detesting and fearing the venomous creatures of the Southwest, she was always in outward sympathy with her father's schemes.

"He must have done so," said Townsend, looking anxiously about, as though he expected to see the spider walking off on stilts.

"Let me help you," said Marian, stooping as she spoke.

"I'll go in and look there," said Lucas. "He may be throwing up intrenchments somewhere. You can't depend on a spider, anyhow."

He smiled lightly and went in, ascending at once to his father's room. It was a curious place, full of rocks, plants, and pin-pierced "subjects." But Lucas had been there before, and he only glanced once over the room, and then began to look for the escaped spider.

In beginning the search he went near to the naturalist's table, and then paused in astonishment. On the table lay a revolver, with cartridges showing in the cylinder, and the fact that such a weapon should be in his father's possession was simply astounding. Townsend had never been known to so much as handle a fire-arm.

Lucas curiously picked up the deadly toy. It was a Smith & Wesson, thirty-two caliber, and improved make, and, though specked here and there with rust, looked capable of taking a life very easily.

Five of the chambers contained cartridges, but the sixth was empty, and the stain of the powder was still visible.

While he was still holding it, the naturalist entered the room in good spirits.

"You needn't search any further, Lucas," he said. "The bright eyes of your sister soon found the runaway, and this time I'll pin him securely to the wall. Ah h!"

He paused suddenly and uttered a little cry as Lucas turned with the revolver in his hand, and the young man looking up with a smile was surprised to see the red color surge to his father's pale face.

"Where—where did you get that pistol?" demanded the elder man, and the spider fell unheeded to the floor.

"It was on your table. Isn't it yours?" asked Lucas, amazed at this strange confusion.

"Yes—no; that is, I suppose so. I found it outside of the ranch."

"Was it loaded then?"

"Of course."

"One chamber is now discharged."

"I tried it on a tree," Townsend explained, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"You shouldn't leave it around so loosely just now," said Lucas, forcing a laugh which he thought might reassure the confused naturalist. "If Brigham should chance to see the toy with its one empty chamber, he might get the idea that the missing cartridge was what ended the life of his soldier the other night."

He was carelessly polishing the nickel-plated barrel on his sleeve, and so he missed seeing the flush in his father's face give way to a deadly pallor.

"Are you mad, Lucas?" he asked, so huskily that the son looked up quickly. "What do I know of the murdered soldier? Do you take me for an assassin? Remember I am a Townsend!"

Lucas went quickly to his side and laid one hand caressingly on his arm.

"My dear father," he earnestly said, "I hope you do not think I meant anything of the kind. I was only jesting, and I know you are the personification of honor. Pardon me, sir, if I spoke thoughtlessly."

"You have done no harm, my boy," said the elder man, more lightly, but his face did not resume its usual placid expression. "I was too quick, but—but— Well, what do men say of that tragedy?"

"All is at present dark, but the two guides are working on the mystery."

"Why don't they leave it to Brigham?" was the peevish inquiry. "He is a gentleman, but they will thrust their noses into every man's private affairs."

"We need not fear them."

"They annoy me; yes, they annoy me," Townsend said, nervously.

"Yet, you would be glad to see the Black Masks rooted out."

"If yes, yes; of course."

Lucas picked up the fallen spider and laid it on the table beside the revolver; then, with a little more conversation left the room.

His father quickly locked the door behind him.

"Good heavens; what a narrow escape!" he exclaimed, huskily. "Why was I so careless as to leave that weapon out in sight? Can he suspect? And he spoke of the murder—I will hide the fatal thing before Marian enters."

CHAPTER XXIII. THE HANDSOME BOY.

DARKNESS settled over Black Bend and silence and inactivity seemed to follow. The proud flag floated over the fort, but no one except the guards seemed astir. In the village, the orderly routine was observed, for though men might carouse at the Lower Bend, the blue-coats stood in the way of such a thing at the settlement proper.

An hour after dark a young man left the hills at the south and glided rapidly in a direction which seemed destined to bring him to the Townsend ranch. His movements, though rapid, were stealthy, and he seemed anxious to escape observation.

We have called him a young man, but he was really a boy if size and outward appearance went for anything; a handsome boy, at that, and one of a class seldom seen in the wild land of gold.

Straight on he went until near the house, but not there did he go. Bearing a little to the right, he entered the very grove of mesquites from which, on a previous night, an assassin had come forth to shoot down the soldier, Woodman.

If he knew what tragic ground he was treading he gave no sign, but in the old cautious, stealthy way, entered the mesquites like a shadow.

Other shadows seemed abroad that night, and cautious as he had been, he had not seen that he was followed at a safe distance by one who moved as silently as he; but he had scarcely disappeared in the grove when the pursuer also entered and the pair of shadows were at close quarters.

The handsome boy went straight to one of the largest trees and thrust his hand into a crevice in the branches. It came out a moment later with something white in his grasp and a smile crossed his face.

Then he pressed the prize to his lips, passionately, but as it was lowered another hand glided over his shoulder and snatched away the note—for such it seemed to be.

Instantly the handsome boy wheeled, his hand falling to the revolver in his belt, but he recoiled as he saw another weapon before him, this one with the muzzle frowning in his very face and held by a man who curtly said:

"Hold, there: keep your hands from your revolver or I will shoot!"

The handsome boy stood dismayed. He saw the note in the hand of the stranger and murder was in his own heart, but the revolver menaced and frightened him and he stood panting like a baffled and petulant woman.

"Who—who are you?" he stammered.

"Don't you recognize me?"

"No."

"Recall the night of the fight in the pass; recall the man you met on the road to the Bend, who called you Brenda and spoke of Houston county."

"Ha! you are—"

"Jean Dupage, at your service. I do not hide my identity; I am not a woman in boy's clothing; I do not go about under false colors. Come, my lady, we know each other now, for you are Zina, of the Black Masks."

"Man," gasped the girl—for she was indeed the outlaw queen, disguised as a boy—and her composure seemed wholly gone, "who are you that knows so much? You speak of my past life and you penetrate my present disguise. Are you a man or a devil?"

"I am your friend, girl," answered Dupage, "and I would not do you an injury. More than that, I would warn you in your hour of peril. I can tell you all you know of yourself. You are the queen of the Black Masks and you came here to-night to get this letter from him who is their king and leader. He is now in yonder house," pointing to Townsend's, "and men would tear him limb from limb if they knew him as he is. Bahl! he wears an innocent face and plays the gentleman, but he is a fiend at heart."

"Beware!" Zina cried. "I will not hear him traduced."

Dupage made an impatient gesture.

"Infatuated girl!" he somberly said. "You are treading the path to ruin. I know that wretch better than you. I have known him longer, and know his heart to be of flint. I tell you ruin awaits you if you follow his lead."

"Be silent!" was the imperious command. "I know you not, but my affairs are not yours and I will suffer no further interference. Give me my letter."

Dupage hesitated.

"Perhaps I may as well. For my own part, I care not what is written by his hand. I might take it to Brigham, in which case the Townsend family would soon be a broken one, but I have mercy for Marian. I know all I care to know of them now. You can have the letter."

Zina snatched the paper he extended and put it away in her pocket, but he stood still and watched her.

"Why do you look at me?" she haughtily asked.

"It is a pity, Brenda," he said, more gently than usual. "I would not have your father's daughter go down to ruin."

"What is that to you?"

"A great deal, for I remember you were once happy and innocent."

"Am I less of either now?" she hotly asked.

"You may be happy, but it is a fool's paradise. The days of the Black Masks are about numbered. Men are on their trail who will penetrate their secrets. Ere many days their leader will be brought to justice and the band scattered. What, then, will become of you?"

"You are a croaker."

"I wish it was no worse, but I tell you there is ruin in the air. Pause while you can, or the queen will go down with the king."

Irritated beyond endurance, Zina snatched a revolver from her belt, but Dupage grasped her wrist and wrested it away.

"Do not try my strength," he coldly said. "I was not born to die by a woman's hand."

The girl stood silent, but her bosom heaved with pent-up anger and other emotions.

"I am going now," Dupage placidly said, "though not to do you harm. My lips will never betray you: see to it you do not ruin yourself. Your only hope is to abandon the wavering cause while you may; when the storm bursts, it may be too late. Perhaps we shall meet again before that fatal day, but, in any case, regard me as your firm and true friend."

With these words he tossed her revolver into the bushes and glided away in an opposite direction. It was well he had not given her the weapon, for as soon as she found it she hurried in pursuit.

Monsieur Dupage, however, had disappeared. Zina paused with flashing eyes when convinced of the fact. Dupage had spoken fairly and kindly to her, but her hot nature was not one to brook advice and interference, and murder was in her heart at that moment.

Dupage was a dangerous man. He knew too much of her past and of the present, and in that hour she doomed him to death.

She soon remembered the note and retreated to the depths of the grove. There she struck a match and read the few brief sentences it contained:

"Meet me at the old place to-night. There is work to do at the cave. We have a traitor in your midst and he must be dispatched. Nothing new. The old place, at ten."

So ran the note, to which there was no signature, but it was enough to send Zina away in haste. The hour was almost ten at that very time, and not for a good deal would she disappoint the writer.

The journey must be swiftly made.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TIGER SHOWS HIS CLAWS.

Two hours later, twenty-two persons assembled in a cave-chamber in the hills. They came in twos or threes, as a rule, though some had no

company. The spot was not far from where Cactus Jack and Zeke Bozeman were once held prisoners by the Black Masks, and the fact that each of the assembled persons had their faces covered showed them to be of the band.

All except one were men. The exception was Zina, and on this occasion her part was a rather imposing one.

Evidently the occasion had importance in the eyes of the robbers, for it seemed to be a state meeting. Zina was gorgeously, if not tastefully clad in a robe of many colors, and on her arms and neck were jewels in profusion.

She sat on a stone platform which was not unlike a throne and by her side was a man who could be none other than the leader of the Masks. Such he was, but the black velvet robe and huge mask hid every clew to his identity.

When all the men had come, he slowly arose and spoke in a deep voice which was plainly disguised. Many of the band had never seen his face, and knew not who he was in private life; they knew him only as "Captain." Two lieutenants aided him to manage the band, but as a usual thing only Lieutenant A and Queen Zina were at the cave.

"Brothers of the League of Gold," said the deep-voiced Captain, "I have called you together to-night on important business. As I said before, I wanted all here, and I see all have arrived except the men on guard. Are there any reports to make?"

No one answered, but several shook their heads.

"Lieutenant B, you are lately from Black Bend. Is all quiet there?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Lieutenant A, have you anything to say?"

A tall, powerfully-built man arose.

"There is nothing new since my last report, except that I am satisfied that our brother who was pushed from the cliff was murdered by some other person than the two guides we at first suspected. I have men on the scent, but, as yet, nothing has been learned."

"The matter must be pressed and his death avenged."

"Certainly, Captain."

"Our vows as members demand it. When we formed our League of Gold, we swore to stand by each other and to be true to the League. Is it not so, Lieutenant A?"

"Yes, Captain."

"And have you been true to your vow?" sharply demanded the masked leader.

The lieutenant started and then promptly answered:

"I have, Captain, at all times."

"Traitor, thou liest!" thundered the leader: and with the words he drew a revolver and covered A's breast. "See, your life is in my hands; one movement on your part and a bullet will pierce your heart!"

It was a thrilling tableau. Dead silence reigned in the room; the subordinates stood amazed and dumfounded, while at the front Lieutenant A cowered for a moment before the unspeaking revolver, and Zina sat calmly on the throne.

Then the accused man slowly folded his hands across his broad breast.

"You wrong me, Captain," he somberly said, "and I am ready for the evidence."

"C and D, advance and cover him with your pistols," the leader went on coldly. "The culprit can have all the evidence he desires."

The designated men first relieved the lieutenant of his weapons and then covered him as directed.

"K and L, advance and speak," the chief continued.

The prisoner started. With K and L, he had plotted to kill their leader and gain control of the band. He had thought the men trustworthy, but he now realized that they had weakened and told all.

They came forward and told their story, but it was in a craven way which showed that they despised their part. At the last, they had grown afraid of the Captain and told him of the plot; but they could not hold their heads erect and doom A to death.

"You have heard, Brothers," said Captain, when they were done. "What say you, shall Lieutenant A live or die?"

"Let him die!" shouted the League of Gold, loudly.

"E, you will count fifteen. At the last word, the traitor dies like the dog he is. Prepare for death, you who would have broken your oath."

The chief's voice was harsh and merciless, but it was no new revelation to his followers. They knew him of old and were aware that no deed of cruelty was too dark for his hand. A had been a bold and zealous brother, but he would die as had been said.

He stood firm, his arms still folded, and smiled behind his mask. He had plotted for an outlaw's crown, had played with fire, but it was not his nature to cringe at the result.

"Go on," he defiantly said. "You shall see how I can die."

E counted firmly and steadily at first, but toward the end his voice grew husky. His was not a pleasant task.

As he pronounced the thirteenth number, the

statue-like victim seemed suddenly electrified. One sweep of his powerful arms cast aside both guards, but at the same moment his right hand grasped D's revolver. He knew that he must die, but he wanted to see the chief precede him over the dark river.

The muzzle was turned, and Zina uttered a little cry, but the man was buffeting against a rock. Before he could pull the trigger a bullet went crashing through his own brain, and he fell headlong to the floor.

The chief slowly lowered the fatal revolver. "Bear the body away," he coldly said. "So perishes a traitor, and so will I sweep away whoever dares to plot against me."

It was no empty boast, for the man and his way were well known, and many there took warning as he intended they should; but as those nearest stooped to pick up A's body, a deep and swelling voice supplemented the last remark.

"Liar and assassin!"

The words were uttered in a way which the echoes of the cave swelled to a thunder-like sound, and while the men started in alarm even the chief was dismayed. His emotion, however, was of a practical nature.

"Who spoke?" he demanded.

No answer was returned. The unknown did not seem desirous of enrolling his name among the victims of the Captain's revolver.

The latter, however, was plainly disturbed. It did not seem as though one of his band would have the audacity to speak thus, however strongly he might sympathize with the late lieutenant; and if a stranger was in the place he must be found, or he could ruin them all.

"Advance, every man, and unmask," the chief ordered.

They came forward promptly and obeyed the command. The faces were for the most part rough and brutal, but all were known to the leader.

"One man is missing," he said, flashing his eyes around. "Where is he?"

"He was beside me only a moment ago," said J.

"Separate and search the cave. We must find the owner of that voice. Notify the men on guard, and bid them let no one pass without all the signs being given."

They hurried away, and Captain went back to the throne and stood in a thoughtful attitude. Once Zina spoke to him and he made no reply. He was all tiger then, and though in a certain way he cared for this lovely woman who was so true to him, it was only at times that he thought of love or would lose himself and his ambition in her presence.

In a few minutes one of the men returned from the rear entrance to the cave. He came hurriedly and seemed troubled, but the chief read the signs and imperiously spoke one word: "Well?"

"N, who was on guard, lies insensible at the rear entrance. The men are trying to revive him, and in the meanwhile I have brought this note which I found pinned on his breast."

He held out a scrap of white paper and the Captain snatched it quickly and read the few words it contained.

"Go on with your mummery, your robbing and killing while you may, but beware of the day when vengeance falls. The League of Gold is doomed and the chief thereof shall die the death of a dog. Beware!"

Captain dashed the note to the floor with an oath and bounded toward the rear entrance. The guard was just recovering his senses, and in a moment he had told how their brother, H, had come to his side and given him an unexpected blow which dashed him senseless to the rocky floor.

"It was not H, but some one who has usurped his place to do us harm," the chief said, with suppressed fury. "Go out, twelve of you, and make search. If you find a stranger, bring him here, dead or alive."

They hurried away to obey his orders, while he went back to the council-chamber in a thoughtful mood.

CHAPTER XXV.

ZINA'S SUSPICION.

THE Captain of the Masks found Zina alone when he reached the council-room. Every member of the band recognized the danger to which they would be exposed if an enemy had really been in the cave—and it did not seem as though any member would attempt a practical joke—so a careful search was being made.

The chief resumed his seat on the throne in silence. Then, with one foot beating a tune on the stone, he sat for several minutes while Zina quietly watched him. When he aroused, it was abruptly.

"Zina," he said, "you are a woman and supposed to be quick-witted. What do you make of this man who has invaded our temple and defied us?"

"Have you no idea?"

"None whatever. It is plain that some one in some way usurped the place of the genuine H, but how, when and where is uncertain. The trouble lies right here: the unknown has seen

us and heard our plans, and unless he is captured we may all be dead within twenty-four hours."

"Better flight than that," said Zina.

"I'll defend my stronghold," declared the chief, sternly.

"Captain, I have a faint suspicion which I wish you to hear."

"Speak it at once, my dear."

"Have you seen a man named Dupage, at Black Bend?"

"I don't place him."

"He is one of the emigrants we robbed on the lower road. Well, I have had two strange interviews with this man, who is a Frenchman, of which you ought to know. You remember that on the night of the attack I stood some distance back and awaited the result. While there I was accosted by this Dupage, who said he had just escaped from the hands of the robbers. I would have stopped him, but he was quicker with the revolver than I and won the game. Worse than that, he called me by the name of my girlhood and spoke of my old home."

"And you did not recognize him?"

"I did not."

"That is strange."

"Strange and startling."

"By the way, what is your real name? I never thought to ask before."

Zina hesitated for a moment.

"Be as forgetful now," she then said, slowly.

"I do not care to speak of my past."

"Just as you say. Well, what of Dupage?"

"He went on to Black Bend and I saw him no more that night. This evening, however, he reappeared."

"This evening?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

She told of the meeting in the *motte*, and the chief listened with growing anger and uneasiness. When she came to the Frenchman's declaration that Townsend's ranch sheltered the chief of the Masks, that individual ground out an oath between his set teeth.

"Evidently this Frenchman's knowledge is too great for our good. He made a mistake in regard to my identity, as you are aware, but such men keep on picking up fagots until they get enough for a good-sized fire. Monsieur Dupage must be removed."

"Can't he be brought to the cave?"

"Why?"

"I would like to know how he obtained his knowledge of my past life."

"Perhaps he would tell too much," said the chief, dryly.

"What do you mean?"

"There! there! Don't flash up at me. I meant no harm; but I, for one, like to have people let alone the footprints I have covered in the past."

While they talked, the searchers returned, but they came without a prisoner. A spy had been in their midst, cunningly disguised, and he had gone away with information which, if used, would put Captain Brigham's soldiers in possession of the cave within three hours.

Zina had made no mistake in her suspicion. The spy who had come and gone was Monsieur Dupage; and when the pursuit began he was so near to the Bend that pursuit was useless.

He did not pause until safe in his room at Dutch Hans's hotel, then flinging himself on the bed, he looked hard at the wall of the room and muttered aloud:

"I suppose I have done a foolish thing, for Brenda, *alias* Zina, will be dull indeed if she does not suspect who shouted in the council-chamber; but I could not neglect the opportunity to give his royal majesty a start. *Peste!* he still uses his mummery of dress, throne and speech, but his ways are ever tiger-like. If Zina betrays me, I suppose he will hunt me down, if he can, but I do not fear him."

Dupage snapped his fingers contemptuously; but it was rather supreme self-confidence than contempt for the Captain's powers that gave birth to the feeling.

Matters were tolerably quiet at the Bend the following day. A few remarks were made on the robbery of Bill Bush and Tom Knott, for the latter had come up to the city proper and given the thrilling narrative; but the only results of the affair were an additional spite against the Black Masks, a sort of charitable pity for Knott, and increased respect for Lucas Townsend, Cactus Jack and Zeke Bozeman, who had so promptly taken a hand in the game.

One incident of the day deserves mention.

Toward night, Nathan Townsend left the room where he had been poring over his "specimens," and went to the attic in what seemed a secret way.

Once there, he looked around to see that he was alone, and then knelt on the floor. Beneath his touch a small board moved, and then from the space underneath he pulled up a blue coat which was ornamented with brass buttons.

It was the same which Marian and Molly, the colored servant, had seen, and on the breast was still the stain of blood, and there also, the bullet hole.

The man of science stood looking down upon it in a thoughtful manner.

"I will take the thing outside and bury it," he said, flashing a nervous glance around. "Some one may chance upon it here, and if Brigham's eyes should see it, perhaps 't would bring me to the gallows. Aha! he thinks me buried in rocks and plants, but there are things in my life he knows not of."

Kneeling, he rolled the gory coat into a compact bundle and then wrapped a paper around it. He went to the door, hesitated for a moment, and then went quickly down, glancing about as though fearful of being seen and questioned.

No one molested him, and he went safely away with his bundle.

Thus it was that, a few hours later, Molly came to Marian, with her dusky face beaming.

"Miss Marian, dat t'ing am gone," she said.

"What thing?"

"Why, de coat up under de floor."

Marian's face brightened.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

Molly was quite sure. The curiosity of horror, if we may use the expression, had impelled her to seek the spot again, but the coat of blue had gone, and Marian was left to wonder who had deposited and who had taken it away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON THE CLIFF.

AT about the same hour that Nathan Townsend was ascending to his attic, a man was clambering over the rocks that lay to the west of the canyon-road from the upper to the lower Bend.

He moved like one who had a fixed purpose in view and his way was straight ahead.

The man was no stranger; we have seen him before and his name was Jean Dupage.

Very light-footed was the Frenchman, and he was covering ground rapidly when something brought him to a sudden halt. Directly in front he saw a young lady of fine face and form, all of which was added to by a picturesque garb; while over her shoulder was a small but deadly rifle.

"It is she," he said, aloud; "I feel sure of it, but it can easily be proved."

He stepped from behind a rock and the girl started slightly, but he lifted his hat in a reassuring manner.

"Have no fear, young woman," he said, politely. "I am here as your friend; in fact, I was seeking your home to do you a favor. This meeting is one of chance, but it is a lucky one, for I am in haste."

"What business have you with me?" doubtfully asked the girl.

"Important business—that is, if you are named Nola."

"That is my name," the mountain girl coldly said.

"And you have a father who is a lone miner?"

"Pardon me, sir, but before I answer I must know your object in asking so much. You are a stranger to me, and I cannot conceive how you gained the information you possess."

"Because you have led a secluded life in the mountains. Well, the people of Black Bend know very little of you, but I have made it my business to be abroad when others have slept. I know of you and your cave home, but I shall never use the knowledge to your injury. On the contrary, it was to do you a favor I came here to-day."

He spoke in a tone which convinced Nola of his sincerity, but she did not wholly forget her habitual caution.

"You have made no mistake," she admitted, speaking slowly. "I am Nola, and my father is a miner."

"Such being the case," continued Dupage, "I will do my business and go. I am in haste, so I will speak plainly at the first."

He glanced to the upper hills, the only places that were still touched by the setting sun, and continued:

"A few days ago you were rescued from danger by a man named Townsend, and he subsequently visited your home."

A defiant gleam shot into Nola's eyes. Somehow, she felt that she was about to hear something unpleasant, and with the perversity of a woman who has taken a fancy to a man, she rebelled at any shaft aimed at the honor of James Townsend.

She did not answer and Dupage again continued:

"I wish to warn you in regard to that man. He is young and handsome and his tongue is smooth and oily, but he is a fiend at heart. I know him well; I know how he can lure and hold; but I also know how he can crush and destroy. Girl, you are young and innocent, and with my right hand upraised to bear witness when I say I know whereof I speak, I would advise you to shun him as you would a viper!"

The Frenchman beld up his hand and his voice was grave and earnest. He had traveled several miles to try to save the mountain girl; traveled, too, over a road which he knew might bristle with danger for him; but he knew the

ways of her sex well enough to doubt his success.

He had not miscalculated.

"Bare assertion amounts to nothing," said Nola, a flush of anger on her face. "Where is your proof?"

"Here!" and Dupage tapped his forehead with his finger. "It is in my brain, my memory; for I am knowing to the facts of his depravity. What these facts are, I must decline to tell. My pledge to another woman forbids. I have given my word; I shall give no more."

"I decline to accept so vague a charge."

"As you will. Your business is not mine, but I wanted to save you. There is something in your youth and innocence which appeals strongly to me, but you must walk the path of your own choosing."

"If you would prove what you say—"

"Ah! but I decline."

"Then, do you expect me to believe your charge?"

"Frankly, I do not. A woman will never believe aught against the man she loves."

"Sir?"

"Well?"

"What would you insinuate?"

"My words were plain, and they can not be warped into an insult."

"I know Mr. Townsend but little better than I do you. It is absurd to suppose—I love him, as you express it."

"We will not quarrel on trifles," said Dupage, placidly. "I am going now, and it is likely you will never see me again. Somehow, I feel ill at ease and oppressed, as though a great calamity was hovering over me. I have enemies about these hills and I will seek a securer place."

The man glanced warily about, looked to his rifle and then started away. He had gone but a few paces when Nola called to him.

"Where can I find you, if so I should desire to do?"

"Ask of the wind; it can answer as well as I," was the somber reply. "Like you, I may perhaps be dwelling in a cave of the cliffs or—under the sod. Don't calculate on my future, young woman; it is too uncertain."

So saying, Dupage lifted his rifle to his shoulder and walked steadily away, not once looking behind; but Nola watched him with a changing expression until a turn in the way hid him from her view.

A half dozen men crowded silently behind rocks, dark, mysterious, and ominous, with masks on their faces, and weapons drawn for use; a little force of men at once recognizable as members of the League of Gold, but with a purpose, if purpose they had, not so easily understood.

The place was west of the canyon road, where a sort of natural trail led along by a wide shelf of rock at the top of a cliff. There, with their chief at their head, the gold robbers were awaiting like red-men in ambush.

Twilight was falling; but though they had waited for some time, they still kept their gaze fixed up the trail.

"Why don't he come?" the chief impatiently muttered.

"He may have gone another way."

"I think not. Oh! he will come sooner or later, and then good-by to Monsieur Dupage."

The leader shut his teeth with a snap at the last word, but just then C, who was beside him, touched his arm.

Down the trail a single man was coming, his rifle thrown across his shoulder, and his manner that of deep, and, perhaps, gloomy thought.

"It is Dupage!" hissed the Captain, and he moved his rifle forward to the face of the rock.

The act was terribly suggestive. It was like a death-warrant, and, so well was the ambush arranged, there did not seem to be one hope for the Frenchman.

He came on as before, and when quite near, the masked outlaw covered him with his rifle. In the dusk the sights were not very distinct, but the would-be assassin was not a man to miss his aim.

"Exit, Dupage!" he whispered, across his rifle barrel, and then his finger touched the trigger.

The report rung out sharply, and the rocks took up the sound with rolling echoes; but before the echo was over, the Frenchman went headlong to the rocky surface, falling with scarcely a sign, and then lying perfectly still.

The chief gained his side by a few quick bounds. He lay upon his face, but the assassin turned him over roughly. The work had been well done. The stamp of death was on his face, and out over the rocks a red rivulet was already trickling.

"He never knewed what hurt him," said C.

"I will make sure," the leader answered.

He tore open the shirt, and then, bending lower yet, saw a small red hole directly over his victim's heart. There was no room for doubt. A bullet could not have gone surer, or with more deadly result. As the robber had said, he never knewed what had hurt him, and, lying there on the cliff's edge, with the merciless outlaw bending over him, his lips would

never open to tell what he knew of the past of Zina, or of the present of the League of Gold.

The murder had been scientifically done.

The chief laughed lightly, made a boast of his marksmanship, and then, at his command, the body was dragged to the edge of the cliff and pushed over.

One enemy was removed from his path. The Frenchman would not come back to do him injury, for, even if he had not been dead at the first, the fall would crush him out of shape.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NOLA'S PERIL.

Two days passed quietly at Black Bend.

Monsieur Dupage did not return to the city, and Dutch Hans was puzzled to know what had become of his guest. If all his bills had not been paid, he might have thought he had left for other fields on the sly; but as he had paid in advance, it was generally believed he had fallen victim to the Black Masks.

His disappearance caused a slight ripple, but as he had no personal friends at the Bend, it soon subsided.

The robbers seemed to be lying low. Men came and went unmolested, and Captain Brigham began to feel a faint hope that the gang had taken alarm and fled; but if Cactus Jack and Bozeman shared that opinion they gave no sign.

On the contrary, they were nearly always busy. When men thought them in their room at Dutch Hans's hotel, they were really abroad and looking about as only sharp men can. Some slight threads had been picked up by the way—more than they revealed to Brigham; and a man who knew their keenness might have suspected that the silent searching was bearing fruit.

Down at the Lower Bend all was serene. Bill Bush was wielding the pick steadily to replenish his funds, and Tom Knott, the stranded man, now and then did a little work, which enabled him to hold his head well up at either settlement.

The affair in the canyon, humiliating as it had really been to him, had borne fruit to his good. Men regarded him well since he had been a victim of the outlaws, and many a free drink went down his ready throat. He seemed to bear no ill-will toward Elbridge McKee, for he was often seen in the latter's store, and already he was talking about a bank for the Bend.

The Townsends moved serenely on their way, and only Marian was ill at ease. She could not forget the blood-stained coat of blue, for she could not understand how it had entered the house unknown to any of its inmates.

James did not forget Old Prospect and his daughter. Perhaps the lone miner singly would not have interested him much, but the face of Nola was always before his eyes.

Such being the case, he resolved to see her again, and one afternoon he shouldered his rifle and started for the upper hills.

In going, he passed McKee's store and received a nod and smile from the proprietor, who was standing in the door, for every one liked James and Lucas Townsend, with their agreeable and gentlemanly ways.

Leaving the bend, he began the ascent of the mountain, and at the end of two hours neared the vicinity of Old Prospect's cave. Only once did he pause, and then to wonder how the half-crazed miner would receive him; but he was willing to dare all, and pushed ahead.

Reaching the entrance, he passed within and soon emerged into the main chamber of the cliff retreat.

As he turned the last corner he heard a voice at a pitch which led him to believe Old Prospect was in one of his wild moods, but it was too late to retreat, and as he turned the point of rock a strange and startling scene was presented to his view.

The general look of the room itself had not changed, but, instead of seeing the old miner and his daughter alone, as James had thought probable, he saw a dozen strange men in a group and faced by Nola with a pair of revolvers in her hands.

James was amazed at first, but the truth soon crept upon him. These men, all of whom were masked, were of the band which had earned so unenviable a reputation about Black Bend, and he suspected their mission to the cave was to rob Old Prospect.

Entering, they had found Nola alone, but from the way in which she faced them, she seemed like a rock in their course. She stood erect, face and form unshaken, eyes steady and fearless, while the yawning mouths of the glittering "sixes" did not tremble a particle.

"Hold up, there," said the foremost of the masked men. "We have got the under hold here, and you are only sowing for a harvest of trouble when you act like this."

"If the worst comes," answered the clear voice of the mountain girl, "I can die. No one can do more. Yet, I do not expect to die at present—certainly not at the hands of the masked outlaws of Black Bend."

"You seem to know us well."

"Too well to think good of you. Shall I tell what I know of you?"

"If it will amuse you, drive on the hearse. A woman is like a volcano—if she couldn't spit out fire and brimstone now and then she would go to eternal smash. Start the mill if your grist is ready, marm."

The facetiousness of the masked leader did not deceive James Townsend. He knew he was in full earnest, and as the gang was probably a detachment from the Black Masks, trouble seemed near at hand. They were vicious and merciless, and as Old Prospect seemed out, Nola must bear the brunt of the trouble—aided by him.

The girl could not have been more outwardly calm if all the garrison of Fort Black had been behind her.

"You are robbers and assassins," she bitingly said, still keeping her revolvers in line. "You live by stealing from honest men who work hard from day to day, and when your interests demand, you do not hesitate to slay your victims. There is many a grave around Black Bend which would not be filled were it not for your infamous league."

"Infamous! That's a hard word, girl."

"What one will better describe so low, cowardly and merciless a gang as yours?"

The masked leader threw back his head with an angry air.

"That is neither here nor there," he said, savagely. "We are here to act, not to talk. We want that hump-backed old pilgrim you call father, and the sooner you trot him out the better."

"I tell you he is not in the cave."

"And I tell you I do not believe you."

"I stand prepared to prove my veracity by these revolvers," Nola said, with strange calmness.

"You dare not fire."

"Try me and see."

"I have no quarrel with you; what I want is Old Prospect," declared the masked man, in angry impatience.

"Why do you want him?"

"For murder."

"Murder?"

"Ay, for murder. Listen, and I'll explain all to you. We lately had a brother whose name was Sturgis, a good and true man; and he was appointed to watch your respected parent. The old man had been seen in the village and we wanted to know more of him. Sturgis tried to play the trailer, but Old Prospect was too cunning for him. He laid in ambush at the top of a cliff, and when our brother reached the spot, hurled him over to his death. For this deed we nearly planted two innocent men; but since then we have learned the part Old Prospect played and we are here to avenge our brother's death."

"I knew the man," said Nola, contemptuously. "He was one of your spies at the Bend, a man of a double face. How he died, if he is indeed dead, I know not; but you will have a sultry time before you can kill or capture my father. He knows how to use his weapons as well as any man in New Mexico, and he has taught me something of the art. I hold this pass, sir outlaw, and I swear that if you raise a hand to molest me I will make your work fatal to you."

The mountain girl looked very pretty in her defiant mood, and also ominously in earnest, but the outlaw snapped his fingers.

"What can you do? You are a woman!" he sneered, but under all was a cruel, threatening current not to be mistaken.

"Woman I am," Nola calmly said, "but this much I can do; the river quickly dries when its headwaters are cut off, and if your men make one move you shall be the first to fall. Now, advance if you dare, for my revolver covers your heart and I never miss!"

Thus far, James Townsend had listened unseen by either of the belligerent parties, but as he saw matters drawing to a focus he resolved to stand up and be counted as a defender of Nola before it was too late.

Consequently, he now stepped forward, a revolver in each hand, and his clear voice supplemented the girl's declaration of war.

"That's about the size of it, and I'm a stockholder in the same concern. We are only two against a dozen, but in case of a dry rain we can furnish accommodations for a good many."

Profound silence reigned in the cave for several moments. The only man who seemed to have a call to speak was the leader of the outlaws, and he stood staring at James in a stupid way.

"What the blazes do you mean?" he finally demanded, putting one hand to his mask as though to see that it was in place.

"Simply that I am here as a defender of this lady, and that I will shoot the man who tries to molest her," was the firm reply.

The outlaw uttered a curse.

"You had better throw off the belt before you start the machine," he savagely said.

"All rests with you, sir robber. If you will retreat, well and good; if you persist in making trouble, I will do all I can to fill up the obituary column of your band."

The leader stood looking into the muzzles of the four six-shooters for some little time in

silence; then, whirling on his heel, he waved his men a little back and began talking with them in a low voice.

"Miss Nola," said James, quickly, "we have talked to them bravely, but isn't our chance a little careworn? We hold four sixes, but in the end we should strike bed-rock. Ain't that so?"

"I suppose it is, but I am not going to let them see me waver."

"A good resolution, and I am with you to the end. We will fight, and fight to kill. Is your father really out?"

"Yes, we are all alone in the cave."

Just then the masked leader turned and came nearer them. While they had rested during the full their revolvers had been a little lowered, but James's now came up with a quickness which made the outlaw dodge his head and then laugh shortly.

His viciousness seemed to have waned.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JAMES AS A GUIDE.

"Don't trouble yourself to shoot," the outlaw said, waving his hand. "I'm not banking after lead pills, so you may as well lower your sixes. We have been consulting, as you see, and the result will naturally please you. We are going to vacate your wigwam, though not from fear. My boys never back down."

"It strikes me you have changed your tune since a man has been added to the defense," cried Nola. "You can war on women bravely enough, but the scene changes when you find your own sex against you."

"Have it your own way; I never argue with your sex," the outlaw carelessly returned. "I was about to add that we came here expressly to find the hunchback, and, since we can't see him, we will call again. As for you, my callow youth, I'll see you again."

"I'll be there," said James, coolly.

Again the outlaw waved his hand, this time to his men, and at the signal they turned and filed from the room, soon disappearing behind a point of rock.

Somehow, the whole affair looked like a farce. The idea that a dozen men of such desperate character as the Black Masks, and led, presumably, by the fearless and merciless "Captain," should be beaten off by one man and a girl, before a shot had been fired—well, the matter looked a little ridiculous and a good deal like a scene put on the boards by contract.

Yet, at that moment, neither Nola or James noticed this feature, or, if they did, it was not mentioned.

"They are really gone," Nola exclaimed, as the last of the band went out of sight.

"I believe they are."

"I hope they will not chance upon father—and I don't think they will. Mr. Townsend, once more I owe you my life. You have saved me from these men as you saved me from the Apaches, and from the bottom of my heart I thank you."

She put both her hands in his and looked up in his face with a look he read full well. From only one source could come what he read there, and his own face grew proud and tender.

"I am glad to have helped you—more so, perhaps, than you think."

His words were so earnest that a slight flush crept into her cheeks; but James was not forgetful of all else in his hour of happiness.

"Are you sure these men are of the Black Mask band?" he said.

"Not sure, but confident that they are."

"Then, by Jupiter, what is to prevent me from following them to their den? Once the place was known, I could lead Brigham there, and then good-by to the robbers of Black Bend."

It was an idea she did not oppose, and after a few more words he said adieu and hurried from the cave.

Left alone, Nola had time to think, but for awhile only one idea was in her mind—the cave refuge was at last known to outsiders, and dangerous ones, at that, so they would be obliged to change their quarters. Old Prospect must be very discreet or he would fall into the hands of enemies who would show no mercy.

Later, and for the first time since the coming of the robbers, she suddenly remembered what Monsieur Dupage had said to her about James Townsend. She had been warned to beware of the man as a villain of the darkest dye; and yet, that very day, he had again come to her rescue and his face had seemed as bold, frank and honest as of old.

"I will not believe it," Nola declared. "The Frenchman was an enemy who would do him harm secretly, and who dared not face him. Mr. Townsend is brave and good; I feel sure of it, I know it."

And at that moment, James was rattling down the mountain at a pace which seemed reckless, since he was going directly in the tracks of the outlaws.

"It is strange how easily I beat off the rascals," he said, laughing. "They might have riddled me with bullets, but, instead, when I raised my six, they caved. Very strange, but true. Now then, to track them to their den

and then lead the soldiers there. After that, the matter will soon be settled."

It was two hours later when Captain Brigham, sitting alone in his private room, was startled by the abrupt entrance of James Townsend, who dropped into a chair and then sat panting for breath.

The soldier looked over at him in surprise.

"What the dickens is up now? Have you been indulging in a foot-race, or are the Apaches at our gate?"

Just then James caught sight of a glass of water near at hand, and when he had swallowed half of it he regained the use of his tongue.

"Captain," said he, "do you want to bag the Black Masks?"

Brigham had been sitting very quietly, but he now aroused with a start.

"It would please me a good deal," he said. "What of it?"

"Simply that I can put you on the track. I have tracked them to a hole in the cliffs, and with your soldiers at your back you can scoop them in easy."

"How did you find them?" Brigham asked, looking a little doubtful.

James told of the adventure in Old Prospect's cave, adding that after he left the place he managed to gain sight of the outlaws again, and then followed on until he hived them in a nest which could be easily invaded by the soldiers.

"Just call out your warriors and I'll lead you there," James added.

Brigham needed no urging. He went out and found Sergeant Springer, and after ordering out fifty men, sent for Cactus Jack and Boze-man. This messenger came back, however, just as the soldiers were ready to start, to say that the guides were absent from the village.

This was a disappointment to the captain, for he felt that their skill might be needed, but he accepted the inevitable and put his command in motion. They marched at a rapid pace, as time was precious, and when the rougher ground was reached, Sergeant Springer grew horrified at the irregular ranks kept by his boys in blue. Once he indulged in a reprimand, but Brigham bade him say no more about discipline that day, and the men went over or around the rocks as suited their convenience.

"Somehow," said Brigham to James, "I do not feel as though I was going to victory."

"I see nothing to hinder."

"All may be well, but I suspect the fellows will show sharp claws. They must be several or more in number, and each one is of fighting timber. I expect a lively brush."

"Well, the game is worth it, anyway. I have had a strong interest in the matter ever since the night-tragedy near my father's ranch, and now I want the league stamped out."

"I'd give a good deal to know the mystery of that night," Brigham thoughtfully said.

"So would I, because I can plainly see that your guide-detectives look at me with suspicious eyes."

"What! Boze-man and Cactus Jack?"

"Yes."

"Surely you must be mistaken."

"I am not; and you must acknowledge that their suspicion is natural. I hear them no ill-will, and when the truth is known, the Townsend family will bear no blemish."

"That goes without saying," Brigham hastily declared. "The guides are strangers in the city or they would never make such a blunder. They have told me they are on the track, but it now looks as though the scent was a false one."

James started slightly.

"Do they really claim to have a clew?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"They have thus far kept their own counsel, and I have no idea of its nature."

James did not answer, but fell into deep thought, from which he finally aroused with a start. They were near the scene of prospective operations, and he passed the word for caution along the line as they entered an irregular canyon.

Brigham recognized the place as the same through which he had once before led his soldiers, with the two prairie men at their head, and his faith began to waver as he suspected they would be led to the very same cave—the deserted one where the guides had been held prisoners.

"Do you see that dwarfed tree growing from the cliff?" James asked.

"Yes."

"Right there the masked men went in, and right there we may hope to find them."

Even as he spoke a series of sharp clicks echoed along the side of the canyon, and as all knew 'twas the sound of rifle-locks, they looked quickly along the ragged cliffs; and there, in a score or more of places, frowning muzzles were covering their persons.

"We are in a trap!" hissed Sergeant Springer; "there is treachery somewhere. What do you know about it, boy?"

He turned fiercely on James as he spoke, and in his eyes was a gleam which boded little good to the volunteer guide.

CHAPTER XXIX.

JUDGE LYNCH COMES TO TOWN.

CACTUS JACK and Zeke Boze-man reached the Bend shortly after the departure of Brigham and his soldiers, but, unconscious of that fact, they went at once to the fort. They had gathered in new threads of evidence, and had information for the captain's private ear; but on reaching the fort they found it garrisoned by only twenty men, and with a corporal in charge.

They listened to the officer's explanation with faces which momentarily grew less and less sanguine.

"Durn my boot-heels! if I don't believe a screw is loose somewhere!" Cactus Jack declared. "Those outlaws ain't fools, not by a large majority, and if Brigham ketches them asleep I stand treat."

"D'ye know w'ot I think, pard?" Boze-man asked.

"Spell it."

"Ther claim is salted, an' them blue-coats are runnin' inter an ambush. Either Jim Townsend is in ther plot, or else he is durnedly fooled himself."

"Boot and saddle, Boze; we must save 'em from the fire, or bu'st in tryin'!"

They rushed from the fort, but as they struck the street a prolonged yell was borne to their ears, and they looked toward the western side of the town to see a confused mass of men surging toward them.

"Whipped so soon, by the Lord!" cried Cactus Jack. "Yes, whipped like dogs, that's plain; but why do they still howl?"

"Hold on," said Zeke. "Them galoots ain't ther sojers. Whar be your eyes, boyee? Kain't you see ther red shirts an'—"

"The miners, by thunder! What brings them here and in such an uproar. I reckon the devil is to pay. Let's go and meet 'em, Boze."

Acting on the idea the guides stalked down the street, and right in front of Dutch Hans's hotel a prolonged yell indicated that they were seen in turn. It was a shout the two could hardly interpret, but at that moment a slight figure in female garments darted from behind the hotel and grasped Jack's arm.

Who she was he could not then tell, for a mask was over her face, but she spoke quickly.

"In mercy's name, flee for your lives!" she cried, excitedly. "Yonder brutes are here to lynch you, and only prompt flight can save you."

"To lynch us!" echoed Jack, blandly.

"I tell you yes; and I know whereof I speak. Cactus Jack, I am the woman you saved from the waters of the Barranca of Death and I would give my life for yours. I tell you they will murder you—flee, while you can!"

"Why do they want to climb us?" demanded the giant, in utter amazement.

"You have trod on the toes of men who strike back again. Did I not warn you by letter against secret enemies? Go, now, at once, and trust to time to prove your innocence."

She was speaking with utmost rapidity, for the red-shirt brigade was near at hand and their howls were full of fierceness. She drew back a little, her weight balanced on one foot and all ready for flight.

"I'll run from no living man!" cried Cactus Jack, drawing up his splendid form while his eyes flashed; but further words were drowned in the howls of the miners.

The masked girl's breast rose and fell with what seemed a heavy sigh, and then like a shadow she glided behind the hotel.

"Thar be is; that's ther critter!" shouted one of the mob, as they came nearer, and then they surrounded the guides, though delaying hostilities for the time.

The words of the girl added to the aspect of the crowd plainly showed Jack and Boze-man that mischief was abroad and riding rough-shod, and, remembering what she had said about a plot against them, Cactus Jack prepared to meet his accusers accordingly.

"Hallo, gents," he heartily said, "you seem to be out in full force. What's the occasion? Apaches on the war-trail or anything serious?"

The shouts had subsided to growls, and these now died entirely away, but one brawny fellow stepped to the front.

"We are on the war-trail," he explained, "an' we propose ter make things hot fur two critters o' about your bigness. Thar's goin' ter be a necktie picnic an' you two are goin' ter climb ther air on a tight rope."

"What's all this nonsense, Bill Bush?" the giant bluffedly asked.

"Nonsense? Is that what you call it? Wait till I state ther case an' you'll change your language. Old man, you've run out your rope an' Judge Lynch is ter give ye another right away."

"I ain't sure that I get the drift of what you say, but it appears that you are threatening to hang me and my pard," Jack coolly said.

"We are goin' ter do it, you cusses. I say it, an' I'm Bill Bush, ther Boss o' ther Lower Bend."

"I've see'd you before, William. But why are you so anxious for my neck?"

"We accuse you o' being ther chief o' ther bloody Black Masks," declared the miner.

"Who says so?"

"I say it!" cried a new voice, and Old Tom Knott pushed to the front, blazing in all the glory of his new garments and bristling with weapons. "Damnation! you can't fool me. I used my eyes well that night you scooped us in ther pass, an' I kin swar you are ther same man that led ther outlaws."

Cactus Jack broke into a ringing laugh. "You are either a fool or a liar," he said, good-naturedly. "Lord love ye! I can prove an *alibi*, and I can prove I was miles away all through the outlaws' early career."

"It won't work, you p'ison critter," said Bill Bush. "Ther proof es dead ag'in' you, an' when ther Lower Bend sights sech game, up she goes a-hummin'."

No one knew better than the guides that their case was a desperate one. If time was given them they could completely clear their reputations; but either luck or some one's cunning planning had brought the lynchers to the Bend at the worst of all times—when Brigham and his boys in blue were away. With them there the riot would have come to an untimely end; but as matters then stood, Bill Bush seemed master of the Bend proper and a bigger man than the captain of the post.

He and his partners might taste to the dregs of trouble afterward; but in their fury they were ready to do any lawless and desperate act.

"I reckon there won't be any hanging-bee," Cactus Jack coolly said. "I am ready to meet the charges of this lizard with the red nose; but as for shaking hands with Judge Lynch today, I sha'n't do it."

"We'll make you," snarled Bush. "All ready, boyees; make a dash an'—"

"Hold on!"

It was Zeke Bozeman who spoke, and even Bill Bush grew temporarily quiet under the command, for it was one which cut through flesh and bone, as it were.

"Hold on!" said the mountaineer. "This tom-foolery hez gone fur enough. We ain't goin' ter be hung this year, an' ther galoot that tries it will lose ha'r. Mister Bill Bush, do you say that this serpent is our accuser?"

He pointed toward Tom Knott, and that man once more raised his voice.

"He said it. Yas, you made a center thar, I am yer accuser, an' I'm Old Tom Knott, late o' Siroc City. I started fur Black Bend wal heeled, an' arrove hyer bu'sted. 'Ca'se why? You an' your gang pounced on ther train in ther pass an' took all we had. Durn ye, I see'd ye both thar!"

"Who hired you to tell this lie?" demanded Cactus Jack, remembering the warning of the masked girl.

"Nobody hired me. Old Tom Knott needs no backer," declared the stranded man.

"Then, maybe, you're willing to try titles with me on bare muscle. I'll fight you to see who's right, or I'll walk into the fort and stand trial when Brigham comes home."

"I don't fight with any sech cattle, besides—"

"So you show the white feather!" cried the giant. "A minute ago you said you needed no backer, and now you turn tail at the sight of the first dog in the barn."

"Durn him! he's so skeered he is white," added Zeke.

Old Tom Knott did seem frustrated, but Bill Bush came once more to the front.

"Don't you cave, Tom!" he shouted. "Put up your fists an' prove yer charge."

"He dassent," sneered Bozeman.

"I'll fight when thar's need on't," blustered Knott, "but hang me ef I tackle a road-agent on sech grounds as—"

"Hold up!" interrupted Bush. "Hyers a rooster that kin both crow an' fight. I'm ther boss o' ther Lower Bend, an' I kin tighten any spoke that rattles behind my team. Cactus Jack, I'm your pard in any kind o' a row yer banker arter, an' ther hat may go round ther crowd ter reward ther man that comes out crowin'. Toss up your shooters an' come at me!"

It was a bold challenge, but a murmur arose from the crowd. They had faith in Bill Bush, but the majority were of Knott's way of thinking, and in a hurry to give the accused men their send-off. Their growl was a mistake, however, for Bush wheeled on them angrily.

"Who dare's lip-in when I say ther word?" he demanded. "I'm ther boss o' this circus, an' I won't see ther ring bu'sted. I kin lick ther man who kicks over ther shaft—who is he?"

No one answered. Not one of the Lower Bend men dared anger their leader, and a grim smile crossed his face.

"I reckon ther bill o' fare will be held to. I ain't no coyote ter rob a dyin' man o' justice, an' all Cactus Jack has got ter do is ter lick me, an' Cap'n Brigham kin step inter Judge Lynch's slippers."

Tom Knott ventured to begin a remonstrance, but one look from Bush silenced him and the would-be pugilists prepared for the encounter.

Both tossed their weapons to friends, and while Zeke Bozeman, looking like a portable armory, watched keenly for the first sign of treachery, the principals faced each other in a business-like manner.

Bill Bush set the ball in motion. He made a

few faints, and then struck out hard and true, but the guide passed the ball without trouble, and at the same time brushed the miner's ear with a gentle downward cuff.

It was a surprise to the victim, and with a flush of shame he sprung forward and sent out his fists like sledge hammers—hotly, but without any immediate effect.

Plainly, Cactus Jack was no novice at the work.

CHAPTER XXX.

OTHER GUESTS ARRIVE.

BILL BUSH was fast verging on fury. For long weeks he had reigned as king in the mining camp, and with all his skill and power he tried to beat down the man before him. It would ruin him if he should be worsted in the presence of his satellites.

Bozeman, watching his fight keenly, even while he kept an eye on the crowd to guard against treachery, soon perceived that Cactus Jack was the better man. Somewhat larger and stronger, he possessed a degree of "science" and quickness not known to Bill Bush. So far he was playing with him, but, anon, the tiger would show his claws.

Now and then the mountaineer would glance toward the gold-hills. He would have given much to see Brigham and his men returning, for in the scowling faces of the miners he read a fixed purpose.

Bill Bush had kept them well in hand, but stirred up by some secret plotter, they were seething with venom and a desire to play the lynchers.

"You'd better take a back seat, William, and give Tom Knott a chance," observed the giant. "You don't seem to be cutting a very wide swath."

"Durn your butes! I'll hev you yit," snarled the miner, as he again shot out a vain blow.

"You'd better back out or you may get hurt. No good can come of your work; you bit off more than you can chew. I'm a tall cactus tree, sixty feet clean but all thorns. You'll get a good deal of electricity if you try to climb me."

"Knock him over, Bill," suggested Tom Knott.

"Shut up your gin-mill, you coward!" roared the perspiring king. "Don't you lip-in again or I'll knock you into chaos."

He began to feel that he was fighting an uphill battle, and with all his powers at the front he went in to win or get beautifully whipped. His tremendous blows were crushers of their kind, but they spent their force on the air as before and the spectators plainly saw that Cactus Jack was only playing.

Anon, he aroused and resolved to end the fight. There is little pleasure in violent exercise in a New Mexico sun, and as the perspiration began to trickle down his face in great beads, he gave Bush warning and assumed the offensive.

His rapid blows bewildered the king of the Lower Bend, and in a minute more there was a heavy fall and then a hush as the miners saw their leader down. He was up in a moment, furious and chagrined, but as he sprung to renew the attack a single blow again prostrated him.

This time he arose more slowly. He was no fool and he knew that Cactus Jack was his master. To buck against him further would be to get seriously hurt; to give up there, would be to lose his proud position at the Lower Bend.

It was a choice between two evils and he knew not which to choose; but Bozeman, surveying the crowd, saw them whisper among themselves and knew that fresh trouble was brewing. Unless he read the signs wrongly, they were contemplating a rush in disregard of King Bush's orders.

He was about to state his suspicions, when a frantic yelling at one side attracted the attention of all, and a man came bounding toward the group from the western end of the town.

He was without his hat, and as he came nearer the men began to distinguish some of his words:

"Injuns! Injuns!" he shrilly shouted. "Ther Apaches are comin'. Injuns! Injuns!"

It was no new cry to those men who had for years lived near Apacheland, but it was the first time it had ever been sounded so near the fort. Before it had been erected the red-men had gone at their sweet will all over the adjacent country; but feeble as the post really was, they had always given it a wide berth.

Now, the crowd stared blankly at the yelling man, but Zeke Bozeman suddenly leveled his long arm.

"Thar they come, by ther Eternal. Durn me ef they ain't goin' to charge ther town an' ther sojers are away!"

Sure enough, a body of horsemen had emerged from the cover of the hills, and as they swept down toward the cabins they were easily distinguishable as Apache warriors mounted on their tough mustangs.

They came in dead silence, but their multitude of arms—a varied collection of rifles, spears, revolvers and knives—weapons purchased and

weapons stolen; together with their known hostility, was proof enough of their intentions. They meant to overrun the town, to murder and plunder, and if all things could be formed to their wishes not a roof would be left at Black Bend, or a man alive to need a roof.

Was it fate, or more of cunning plotting, which had sent them, like the miners, to the town at the precise moment when the soldiers were away.

Just then none of the white men stopped to argue the question. They realized their danger, individual and collective, and Bill Bush at once became the veteran borderman.

"Wake up, pards," he said, quickly. "Them red heathen outnumber us all, an' we must fight like thunder. Give me my wepons—"

He paused suddenly and looked at the guides. "Boyees," he then abruptly added, "you are old Injun-fighters an' brave men. Shall we postpone this frolic an' make common cause ag'in' ther 'Patches?"

"Bet your boots!" answered Cactus Jack. "Shove out your tools and we'll mow a good swath for you."

Bill Bush clasped the hand of the gallant speaker, and then their weapons were returned to them, and every one seemed to forget the past trouble in looking to the present.

In good truth, it was a crisis that demanded the attention of every able-bodied man at the Bend. Already, twice their own number of Apaches were in sight, and there was no knowing how many more were behind, and as the red bucks were hard fighters and lifelong foes it was plain that something must be done to save the city.

Bill Bush had only acted his nature when he took the hand of his late antagonist. Braggart, bully and rough that he was, there was considerable manhood pent up in the crevices of his heart, and now that every arm was needed he became for the time Cactus Jack's strong friend.

Fight they might afterward, but Bill Bush would never act the hypocrite or backbiter.

Several of the miners were voicing the idea of seeking the shelter of the fort, but Bush turned to Jack.

"What's your advice, pard?" he asked.

"If you do it, Black Ben will be ablaze in half an hour," the giant coolly answered. "I reckon you had better send a man to find Brigham and then fight the bucks from the cover of the cabins."

The king promptly fell into line and gave the required orders. The miners scattered to seek such cover as they deemed best, for some bowlders were scattered through the village, and then came the critical moment.

All these movements had required but a short time, and no more time could have been obtained. The oncoming Apaches would not wait, but, though outnumbered, the white men faced them resolutely.

Cactus Jack, Bozeman and Bill Bush had sought the same cover—a long, low rock which at one end met an *adobe* cabin; and very soon their rifles were lying along the top of the breastwork.

"I'll take ther big buck on ther claybank," said Bush, "an' let us all fire together."

They took aim, and at that moment the giant's quick ears caught a familiar sound from the distant hills. It was the report of rifles, and he knew Brigham's force was also engaged with some enemy.

Simultaneously the three men fired, and the crack of their rifles was the death-note for as many Apaches. Three went down in the front rank, and then from cabins and bowlders the long rifles began to spit out their fatal bits of lead.

It was a destructive fire, for even the red-skins were no greater fighting-men than the veteran miners; but though many a gap was plowed in the red band, they did not for a moment waver in their swoop.

Bill Bush, hurriedly reloading his rifle, was looking toward the fort to see what the few blue-coats left there were going to do about it, but thus far not a soldier had made himself visible.

"Cuss ther cowards!" muttered the 'king,' as he faced about for another shot.

The two guides were not bothered by the labor of reloading. Unlike the miners they carried repeating rifles—the same they had used on the plain when pursued by the red bucks—and, never lifting their heads, they were sending out shot after shot with deadly effect.

But the wild warriors were at last close at hand, and with a series of yells they dashed into the midst of the defenders.

Pitted against ordinary men, they might then have had a fearful advantage, for they had ready weapons to oppose to the emptied rifles; but the miners were not made of cowardly material.

Lying close behind bowlders, or up against the cabin corners, they brought out their revolvers and began to shoot with the regularity and coolness of machines.

The state of affairs at this juncture baffles description. Plenty of noise was furnished by the Indian yells and United States cheers, by

the rifles and revolvers; and on all sides the Apaches could be seen charging here and there where a white man was to be seen, each man for himself and life or death for them all.

Here a red buck could be seen in pursuit of a miner who had been pressed into momentary flight; there, a stalwart miner had a mustang by the head or his rider by the throat; and everywhere men fought on foot or in the saddle as circumstances made necessary.

In the midst of it all a cheer sounded from up the street and the soldiers left to guard the fort came charging down at double-quick, their bayonets glistening and their blue coats showing well in the sun.

Yet, Bozeman, who had seen soldiers fight before, fairly groaned at the sight. If the Apaches knew their business this handful of brave but indiscreet men would soon be wiped out of existence. He groaned because they were too few for a charge on open ground and too many to be slaughtered.

Quickly he sprang to his feet and waved his hat above his head.

"Back!" he shouted; "you are comin' ter your death. Break an' fight from cover!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SHOWER OF LEAD.

CAPTAIN BRIGHAM did not hear the savage question with which his subaltern turned upon James Townsend. For a brief space of time Sergeant Springer believed they had been decoyed into a trap by the young man, but his accusing gaze was unfalteringly met.

The Captain looked further and saw more than Springer. He saw painted faces beside the rifle-barrels which protruded from the seams in the cliffs, and though not a veteran Indian-fighter, he was not long in perceiving that the ambushed men were Apaches.

James Townsend, too, seemed to discover as much, for, disregarding Springer's words, he scowled and muttered:

"Red bucks, by thunder! The game is blocked."

The exclamation sounded natural enough, and yet there were people in and about the Bend who had so little faith in James that they might have misconstrued his meaning had the words fallen on their ears instead of the friendly ones of Brigham.

A pause ensued. The boys in blue expected a volley but none came. The rifle barrels kept their places and so did the red faces; but the rest of the grim warriors' persons were hidden in the crevices and seams.

Brigham hesitated to begin hostilities. The Apaches had given no actual sign of evil intentions, and so long as they kept the peace it must not be said a quarrel had been forced by Uncle Sam's men.

"Hello! there," he finally shouted. "Who is running this museum, anyhow? I see Apache warriors before me, but where is the chief who speaks for them?"

"The eagle builds his nest on the highest crag. Is the red-man less wise?" a voice suddenly and clearly asked, speaking in good English.

"I'm afraid you won't relish a nest where you now are, Indians. Other birds have nests near at hand, and you may get to pulling out tail-feathers."

"The Apaches are not children," was the reply. "They come and go when they see fit. Whose business is it?"

"It strikes me," said Brigham, keenly, "that your voice smacks a good deal more of white than red skin. You may be Apaches, but I doubt it, and—"

Just then Sergeant Springer touched the captain's arm:

"There are more men up the canyon," he said. "They are skulking near the base of the cliffs and I believe we are in a trap as I at first said."

"I reckon a screw is loose somewhere," was the cool reply, "but we will baffle the rascals yet. Men, when I give the word, start down the canyon at double-quick. They will naturally expect us to fight our way back, and this move will take them by surprise. Now, ready!"

He glanced over his command and saw that all were attentive, and then he gave the word and they dashed down the canyon, away from the men in the crevices and straight past the holes where the League of Gold had once lived.

Profound silence followed their abrupt departure, but it was quickly broken by the patter of bullets and, had they looked back, they would have seen the riflemen peering from the crevices to see the result of their work.

What they saw could not have been particularly pleasing, for, by some lucky chance, each and every blue-coat escaped injury and they went on at double-quick.

Brigham, however, was not disposed to give up so tamely, and after a short time began to look for some place where they could gain the level. He had come out to hunt the Black Masks and he had no intention of turning his back permanently on the force in the crevices, but it would be madness to stand underneath and let them do all the shooting.

The walls of the canyon, however, were very steep for some distance, and it was not until a quarter of a mile had been traveled that a scalable place was found. Then the right-hand wall dwindled to a bluff and they succeeded in ascending.

After that, no time was lost. They faced to the east again and marched rapidly along the back-track, keeping a sharp watch for danger as they went.

Brigham wished in vain for the aid of Cactus Jack or Bozeman—the guides were at that moment chewing a morsel at the Bend of which they could not let go.

The way was still rough and broken, with gigantic boulders and little knolls in the way, and everything was so favorable for an ambush that the captain grew cautious and finally halted his command.

"Remain here with the men, Sergeant Springer, while I go on a scout," he briefly said.

The subaltern instantly demurred. It did not seem the proper thing for their leader to assume such a duty; it would be far more systematic to send a private or—or himself. He had arrayed himself on the wrong side, however, for Brigham had made up his mind and intended to carry out the programme.

He gave a few directions and went away.

Although not an experienced scout, the captain possessed good judgment and caution, and he made a *detour* and skulked along through the bushes and among the rocks in a way which was careful if not scientific.

About half of the distance had been traversed when, as he was about to glide from a thicket, a glimmer of light from the slope above brought him to a halt. That glimmer was nothing new to him; he had seen it hundreds of times before when a bright sun struck the polished side of a bayonet.

Lower in the bushes crouched the soldier, and as his eyes ranged the slope he saw more of the tell-tale gleams, and here and there a dark form lying flat on the ground.

He gauged the situation at once. In some way, perhaps through spies, the enemy had learned of the return course the soldiers were pursuing, and on the slope they had crouched down to await them—a capital place for an ambush.

Nothing was wanting except the hare; once caught, they could quickly cook him.

Brigham smiled grimly.

"There they are, the beauties!" he said. "It is the same gang that tried their hands on us in the canyon, and now they banker to take another turn at the wheel. Good! we will now see who laughs last, and be these fellows red or white, I'll try my best to give them a lesson."

Back to his boys in blue went the captain, and then by the same route he led them around to the rear of the ambush, leaving ten men under Springer to bar the way of retreat if the painted enemy took to their heels.

All being ready for work, Brigham gave his orders, and as one man the soldiers arose from their cover and charged up the slope.

The men in ambush had quick ears, whatever may have been the quality of their brains, and they quickly took the alarm and seemed to relapse into confusion and dismay. A hoarse voice shouted an order to fire, and three or four harmless bullets sped down the slope; but it was a fatal indiscretion on their part.

Brigham shouted an order in turn and the blue-coats sent a volley up the hill, many a ball finding lodgment in human flesh; and then they went on with presented bayonets.

The unknown leader tried to induce his men to stand firm, but a lucky bullet cut short his career, and the dismayed men broke and fled.

Over the crest of the hill they went with the soldiers close in their rear, and then Sergeant Springer's detachment took a hand in the game. It was running a risk to fire, but the blue-coats were all veterans and no mistakes were made. Foes, not friends, received their leaden cards, and the fleeing Apaches, or whatever they were, lost all claim to order. Some threw down their weapons and surrendered, others tried to skulk away, and a braver portion set their teeth and tried their luck at fighting.

Confusion reigned for awhile, but the blue-coats held the winning cards, and in the end the whole gang was either killed or captured. Fifteen prisoners and about the same number of dead men were on the hands of the victors, but Brigham did not waste much time.

He took the prisoners to the nearest water and gave them an application which brought off their paint and left them as nearly as white-skinned as himself.

So far, all was well, but he wanted more light. Consequently, one man was taken apart from the others and invited to explain who they were. He at first refused, being a modest man, but the introduction of a bayonet near his ribs opened his mouth and the truth came out.

A band of Apaches, including, also, some thirty white renegades, had taken to the war-trail. The red-men were even then hanging about Black Bend, hoping for a chance to do mischief, but the white allies, knowing something of the League of Gold, had gone at once

to the canyon and taken position there to watch for the gold robbers.

It was mere chance that the soldiers appeared before the Black Masks, but it had been a fatal one for the painted pale-faces.

Such was their story, but it was enough to arouse Brigham. If the Apaches were hovering near the Bend, the sooner he returned there the better it might be for the town.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FIGHTING THE APACHES.

ZEKE BOZEMAN'S warning to the blue-coats was one they should have heeded, for it was really madness for such a handful of men to charge in among the Apaches. The hard-fighters of the red band would make short work of the "regulars," and in the meanwhile it would be hard work to impale even one enemy on the bristling bayonets.

Luckily, the fortunes of the fight had carried Cactus Jack nearer the soldiers than Bozeman was, and he leaped up from the ground, where he had just settled a dispute with a brawny "buck" and confronted the brave but rash blue-coats.

"Hold on, there!" he shouted. "You go to your death if you keep on. The only way to fight is Injun fashion. Scatter to cover and your rifles will mow them down in heaps."

His voice more than his words carried conviction to the minds of the soldiers, and as several bullets whistled viciously past them they looked for targets, blazed away wherever they saw an Apache and then sought cover behind cabins and rocks.

The fight was at a fever point. Outnumbered as they were, the miners were not men to give ground in any case, and on every side they were fighting like heroes. The battle-field had gradually widened until nearly the whole village was a scene of desultory fighting, but the grim defenders noticed that when they stumbled over a corpse it was usually that of an Indian. They were making their mark nobly.

Bill Bush, fighting like a gladiator, at all times watched Cactus Jack, and every minute increased his admiration for the man. The fame of the giant guide was great along the Minibres, and as Bush saw him move like a spirit of destruction among the Apaches, he knew the reputation had been fairly earned.

One more thing the king of the Lower Bend saw anon.

Old Tom Knott had not been conspicuous among the defenders; indeed, Bush had not seen him since the fight began until, after some time, he appeared quite near to Cactus Jack, who was fighting hand-to-hand with a huge warrior.

The stranded man held a revolver in his hand, and with quick steps he approached the two. Bush believed he was about to help the guide, but, half-unconsciously, he paused to see the result.

Then a cry of anger burst from his lips, as he saw the fellow thrust his revolver against Cactus Jack's head, even while the latter was struggling with the Apache.

Realizing that a murder was intended, Bush quickly raised his own weapon, but, before he could use it, Knott threw up his arms and fell to the ground, his life-blood spattering both contestants. A chance bullet had struck him full in the head and ended his career forever.

Such was Bill Bush's interpretation of the shot, and it was pretty certain that Tom Knott never knew what hurt him; he had died almost in the act of committing a foul and cowardly crime.

Unconscious of all this scene behind his back, Jack dashed down the Apache and stood over him a panting victor; then a surge of the battle caught up both him and the mine-king, and the work went on as before.

The defenders began to feel worried. Their loss was small compared with that of the Indians, but the force of numbers began to tell and the wearied men fought with more of desperation than heart. Twice the savages had tried to fire the village, but prompt action had in each case frustrated their scheme.

At this critical moment came a welcome interruption. A ringing cheer sounded above the noise of battle, and as red-men and white looked up they saw Brigham and his blue-coats charging at double-quick.

A more complete reaction can not be imagined. The tired defenders knew that the day and their town were saved, while, in such a place, the Apaches had none of that contempt they could show for the soldiers when on neutral soil—dodge them they usually did on the prairie or amid the mountains, but in Black Bend they had not a ghost of a chance.

The miners echoed the cheer, but the red-skins wheeled for an unceremonious departure. Not a blow did they strike after that first cheer reached their ears, but Brigham was not disposed to let them go so easily.

A telling volley was sent after them, emptying many a red buck into the sand, and then the blue-coats made a dash for their horses.

The miners did not join in the new order of things. They had no horses at hand, and, besides, they were tired out and aware that the

Apaches would escape without further serious loss; so they gathered together to size the situation.

Dead men lay around all too plentifully, but an inventory showed that twelve whites were past human aid. Two or three others seemed likely to follow them across the divide, and slight wounds were numerous; but, to offset these casualties, twenty-six Apaches had been left behind, dead or dying.

Bill Bush, as king of his crowd, was never neglectful of his duties, and for some time he was busy with the dead and injured; but when he again remembered Cactus Jack and Bozeman he found them at hand, working together to bandage a miner's wounds.

Bush's eyes had been opened. If he had used his better judgment at the first he would never have thought ill of one with Cactus Jack's reputation; but he had yielded to a foolish and unnatural gratitude toward Tom Knott and a love for excitement. Now, Knott's attempt to play the assassin had been conclusive, and, besides, a man who could fight like the giant was one to be honored and admired.

He went to him and put out his hand frankly.

"Pard," he said, "I have been a mule-eared fool an' I feel mean enough ter chew dirt. If you kin overlook it you kin count me ther best friend you hev in these diggin's."

"What's the racket now?" Jack asked, in surprise.

"I wish you would finish lammin' me fur j'inin' in ther lynchin' picnic."

"Oh! I'll clear myself at trial," was the careless reply. "I'm no road-agent, and I mean to show you all just why Tom Knott put up a job on me. He must prove his charge or swallow it."

"Ther cuss is deader'n a dornick," Bush declared.

"Dead?"

"Slipped ther picket fur good. Didn't you see him turn up his toes?"

"No."

The giant spoke regretfully, for he wanted his name cleared, but when Bush told of the attempted assassination he felt that he was pretty well vindicated.

"It only remains to find out *why* he settled on me," he said. "Sure as shooting, there was a cause for his charge. I half suspect he is a relic of the Black Masks."

And then Bill Bush once more asked forgiveness, and when he had explained all to the miners they gave a cheer for Cactus Jack. The tide had turned—no more lynching for them so far as the guide was returned.

James Townsend, after arriving at the village, had gone at once to his own home. Two dead Apaches lay near the door, but the fear at his heart departed when Lucas came out laughing. The bucks had tried their hand on the house, but Lucas had handled his weapons with skill and some lead had been carried away in human flesh, not to mention the ghastly ornaments at the door.

The brothers carried the two bodies out of sight, and there, as in other parts of the village, matters soon subsided into a quiet very near the old channel.

Brigham and his blue-coats returned in an hour and reported that over a score of Apaches had been dispatched in the running fight, so his prediction that the red bucks would beat a rapid retreat from the vicinity of the Bend seemed well founded.

It had been a disastrous expedition for them, and that night the white men rested without much fear.

The painted pale-faces captured in the mountain were placed in confinement, but though Brigham tried to connect them with the Black Masks, they stuck to their first story, and he could but believe they had been allies of the Indians.

Darkness came, but neither Cactus Jack nor Bozeman were disposed to remain in-doors. The possibility that the Apaches might return furnished a good excuse for activity, and they went out well armed and silent as usual.

"Let's take a peek around Townsend's," suggested Zeke, when they were alone.

"I reckon all will be quiet there to-night. They will expect us to be wide awake after the events of the day."

"Twa'n't do no harm ter walk over, an' maybe it will be one o' the nights fur ther durned critter. Things are goin' purty fast round ther Bend, an' if some body don't bring up ag'in' a snag fore long, then I'm a liar."

"Do you know, Boze, I nev'r carried on a work with so little heart as I feel for this piece of business? When we spring our trap there will be weeping and wailing at Townsend's. It seems a durned pity to break up the family—shoot me if it don't."

"Cap'n Brigham will feel it as keen as anybody, I reckon," the mountaineer gravely replied, "but justice can't be thwarted. Ther chariot must roll on, an' ef any two-legged critter plays with fire he must take the consequences."

They went on until near the house, and then paused at the edge of the grove so often referred

to in previous pages. All was quiet, and only for a single light in the house they might have thought the family sleeping.

After a brief pause they were surprised to hear Cactus Jack's name pronounced, and as they turned, some one came out of the mesquites. Dark as it was, the giant needed but one glance to recognize the masked girl who had warned him in the village that day, and he advanced to meet her with eagerness.

"Hallo, miss!" he genially said. "I'm glad to see you, for I have been worrying for fear the durned Apaches had carried you off. I looked for you in vain after the fight, and I had about made up my mind I should have to buckle on my armor and go to your rescue."

"My wits have been sharper since the night you saved me from death in the *barranca*, and through caution and luck I have managed to keep out of trouble. You are at present in greater danger than I."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

Cactus Jack was more pleased at this encounter than might be supposed, but from the time when he rescued the mysterious girl from death at the *barranca* he had never succeeded in getting her out of his mind. He was not the kind of man to fall in love with each new face—in fact, he had never bowed to any woman's power; but this girl and the mystery encompassing her had made a deep impression on his mind.

He had an amount of chivalry not common to men of the nineteenth century, and all along he had felt that he would gladly fight her battles.

Now, for the first time, he had a chance to talk to her and he meant to improve it.

"I suppose I know what you mean," he said, in answer to her last words. "You warned me by letter once, and again to-day. You have told me that by warring on the Black Masks I am daring a good deal, chiefly from secret enemies. I know all that, but I defy them. I'm a tall cactus on the half-shell and they had better steer clear of my thorns."

"They made it warm for you, to-day."

"That lynching affair was started by them, then?"

"The man who called himself Tom Knott was their spy. So was the man you found one night at the foot of the cliff. Do you know who threw him over?"

"Not for sure."

"Have you seen the solitary miner called Old Prospect?"

"Yes."

"He has a daughter whom the chief of the Masks desires to possess. He set his spy on Old Prospect's track to learn where he had his secret home, but the old man was too cunning for him. He laid in ambush and threw him off the cliff as you saw."

"Who is this mysterious chief of outlaws?"

"Don't you know?"

The giant leveled one hand toward Townsend's.

"I reckon he sleeps there," he quietly said.

"He is harmless only when sleeping. Did you know the man called Dupage?"

"Yes."

"Another life on the hands of this merciless chief," the girl sadly said. "Dupage knew his ways and hated him, and, among other things, he went to Old Prospect's daughter and warned her. The girl was blind and would not listen, but she little knew what was about to follow. Dupage has not been seen since. Shall I tell you why? The Black Masks laid in ambush for him and the chief shot his victim to the heart. I, myself, buried the body at the foot of a cliff."

"Why did the Frencher hate this prince of cutthroats?"

"For some injury of the past."

"Durnation! The critter is old in villainy for one of his smooth tongue and pleasant ways."

The girl shuddered but did not reply.

"You say Tom Knott was their spy," Jack added, absently.

"Yes. He was sent here as a victim of the robbers, and in this role he gained good will and favors on all sides, especially from Bill Bush. But—but do you know how he died?"

"Shot plum-center," was the careless answer.

"Mr. Jack, it was I who fired that shot. I was resolved to repay you for your goodness to me, and when I saw the wretch about to shoot you, I stained my hands with blood for the first time. Yes, I shot him."

"And saved my life!" cried the guide, seizing her hands, warmly. "Little girl, you are my guardian angel, and by the peaks of—"

"There! there!" she interrupted, but her voice was soft. "don't be foolish, Mr. Jack. We are now even, and we can go on as friends."

"Bet your life," he answered. "But, see here, can't you tell your name and explain the mystery of your life? I am all in the dark."

"Be content to remain so for a time. When the crash comes in Black Bend, as it will soon do, I may decide to unmask. Don't be impatient with me, Mr. Jack, for you and your

partner are my only friends, and in time all will be well."

"I trust you to the end," declared the giant. "Yes, I'll trust you and—and be your friend."

Some further words were exchanged, but the girl had grown restless and uneasy, and in a short time she bade them adieu and went away.

Cactus Jack looked after her regretfully, and then abruptly shouldering his rifle, turned toward the center of the village.

"Come," he shortly said, "let's get out of this and go to bed."

The events of the day had been of a nature which excited and alarmed Marian Townsend. During her residence in the West, she had been singularly fortunate in escaping scenes of bloodshed and strife, but the protracted struggle in the village had unnerved her to a degree she had never before known: nor was it at all strange when a part of the bloody work occurred at their very door.

Lucas and James finally succeeded in quieting her somewhat, and the elder Townsend returned to his scientific studies with a placid face, as soon as the Apaches had gone. The brothers had both seen a share of fighting that day, and while Marian shivered at their words, they laughingly spoke of becoming professional Indian-fighters; but if the truth had been spoken, they looked forward rather to a peaceful life in the East.

James had been deeply impressed by Nola, while at the old home was a fair young girl of whom the younger brother often thought, and whom he intended to again see when their Western experience was over.

Marian finally went to her own room, but she was not in a mood to retire. She looked out on the village, which was as peaceful as ever, and then fell to reflecting on the wildness of life in the West.

Anon, her thoughts wandered to the night tragedy when the soldier, Woodman, lost his life, and then, naturally, to the blood-stained coat she had seen in the niche under the floor. How it came there, and where it had gone, remained a mystery, for she had never dared mention it to her relatives.

Something awakened a curiosity to again look on the place where it had been, and after once abandoning the idea as absurd, she finally took a lamp and went to the store-room.

Everything was as usual about the place, and after a brief survey she set down the lamp and removed the loose board.

Then she started back, almost in terror, for the blue coat again lay in the niche.

Dead silence reigned for a moment, and, motionless, the girl stared at the mysterious garment as though she saw a ghost. Its reappearance was as mysterious as anything which had gone before, and as she could not persuade herself that she was dreaming she knew not what to think.

Why was the horrible thing in the house, and who had been engaged in its removal and return?

When she stirred, it was to bend down and lift it from its hiding-place, thereby yielding to an unnatural curiosity she could not explain.

Her hand accidentally came in contact with the blood-stain, and then it fell to the floor, lying with the brass buttons uppermost; but it was none of these things which brought the look of renewed wonder to her face.

She had made a new and strange discovery.

When first she saw the coat it had been perfectly whole and well-conditioned except for the single bullet-hole in the breast; but now no less than five holes were visible, all near together, all round, clean cuts, all plainly made in the same manner—by bullets.

What did it mean?

She asked herself the question in vain as she looked down on the gory mystery. Before, the situation had been dark and dreadful, but a perplexing element had been added for which she could find no explanation. How had the additional bullet-hole been made?

The idea that she was looking on a different coat was not to be entertained; she knew it was the same she had before seen. For a moment she wondered if the additional work had been put in during the leaden hail of the day, but this idea was rejected as soon as conceived and she shudderingly thrust the coat back.

"I'll not try to solve the mystery," she impatiently said; a good resolution, but one hard to follow. "I'll ask the boys if they know anything about it, and some one must burn the coat. It worries me!"

Ah! Marian Townsend, you would be still more worried if you knew of the cloud that is hanging over your home, if you knew that the eagle eye of the law is upon the going and coming of those you hold dear. Well, perhaps, it is for you that no one can read the future, but, in spite of that, the gathering storm is waxing strong.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ANOTHER MISSING MAN.

The following day dawned peacefully at Black Bend, showing few signs of the late strife. All the dead had been buried, the

Apaches in one long grave and the white men more pretentiously; and except for the wounded in the village everything seemed as before.

Bill Bush and his fellow miners had gone back to the Lower Bend, the soldiers, failing to find occupants at the place to which James Townsend had led them, had settled into the old routine; the two guides seemed wholly at their ease and without work to do; and at the Townsend home all were occupied as usual.

The elder man was the only busy person of the household, but, with a room full of curiosities of various kinds, he was never idle. He seemed to grow more absorbed and retiring with each passing day, and often, of late, when Marian had gone to his door, she had found it locked and she was only admitted after some delay.

The idea that there was a reason for this beyond her father's desire for privacy never occurred to her, but Lucas, remembering the revolver he had once seen in the room, now and then felt a lazy curiosity to know what use the naturalist could have for it; but he was considerate and affectionate as a son and so asked no questions.

Shortly after the heat of midday began to abate, James and Lucas took their rifles and went out together. Marian had vainly asked them to remain in-doors; they had been long enough in the West to feel confidence in their abilities, and they went away laughing at her fears.

She watched them as they walked down the street, feeling all of a sister's pride, and, indeed, two more prepossessing young men did not exist in New Mexico. Strong of form and handsome of face, they had a gay and pleasant way which won them friends outside of their own family.

Left alone, Marian busied herself as best she could. Time did not pass any too quickly in that remote region, but she was feeling in a contented mood when a glance from the window showed her she was to have a caller.

Mr. Elbridge McKey was walking toward the house, and as her brothers were both away she would have to entertain him. She might as well try to induce a prairie dog to come out of his hole as to think that the elder Townsend would leave his treasures for an ordinary caller.

So she nerved herself to be civil to a man she disliked, and when the merchant entered he was received politely if not cordially.

He had dressed in magnificent style for the occasion, but with so little taste that Marian barely repressed a smile. His costume was gorgeous enough for a well-to-do Southern dandy.

Wholly ignorant of the fact that there was a weak point in his make-up, McKey sat down and allowed his oily tongue full play. He was not one to be at a loss for subject-matter when in a lady's society, and with such exciting scenes as had lately occurred to talk about, he had a well grassed field before him and at once proceeded to cut a wide swath.

Marian listened politely; but she did not herself seem in a talkative mood, and all the while she was hoping something would occur to interrupt the interview.

McKey's mind ran in a different channel. He had come with a settled purpose, and in due time he cautiously approached the subject.

"How soon do you leave for the East?" he asked.

"It is not yet definitely settled."

"Mr. Townsend will have many curiosities to carry home."

"He has a large number."

"Black Bend will miss him sadly. He is reckoned our foremost citizen, and in such places every prominent man counts."

"The Bend's loss will be his gain," Marian said, with some curtness in her voice.

"True! He is more fitted for the East than this remote region. I have half a mind to return East myself."

"Are you not doing well here?" the girl asked, taking the alarm at once.

"Finely, Miss Townsend, finely. I can go home a rich man; but my wealth increases every day, and I should remain were it not for one thing."

He paused to give her a chance to ask him what the one thing was, but she remained provokingly indifferent.

"I should advise you to remain here, Mr. McKey."

"Do you think it best?"

"Decidedly so."

"I would be willing to do so on one condition."

Again the visitor paused for her to fill the blank, but it was not done to his liking.

"It is a fine and growing country, sir."

"True, Miss Townsend, true. More, it is one where a man can soon get rich. If he lives here, however, he must put up with a good many inconveniences. To be contented, the Western man needs a wife—one whose smile will meet him on his return from his daily labors, whose care will be over his house, whose love and sympathy will ever be his, and thus transform the dull routine of daily labor into a blissful state and a fairy kingdom, where he

may reign as monarch—a limited monarch, you understand—and she be an angel to soothe his hours of weariness—and have unlimited money at her command."

Elbridge paused for breath. He had made the greatest effort of his life; he had done what he felt was a fine piece of work in the oratorical line despite the fact that there were one or two weak points; and he felt that if he had his rights Marian would immediately throw herself into his arms.

She failed to do so, however. It may be his eloquence overpowered her, or that she thoughtlessly neglected what she knew was her duty; but, judging from the faint smile quivering about her lips, one would almost think she was laughing at his rose-tinted picture.

"The days of earthly angels are over, Mr. McKey," she answered. "Nowadays, my sex prefers the privilege of marking male faces as the hunter creases the mustang, except that he uses the bullet, we, our finger-nails."

This heartlessly practical remark was very untimely, but the merchant managed to rally his wavering troops and returned again to the assault.

"Ha! ha! You are as clever as ever, Miss Townsend. Wit and beauty hover over you like the three graces."

It was a pretty little compliment when taken in the rough, but a careful analysis would show that he had become slightly mixed in his numerals, while, to tell the truth, he had no more idea what "the three graces" were, or had been, than he had of the age of the sphinx; but in making love such little tendencies to recklessness should never count.

He went on bravely.

"I have come here to-day, my dear Miss Marian, with a settled purpose. I have known you for a long time, and always to my pleasure. Day by day my admiration has increased, and now I can no longer hold back my burning words. Marian, I love you! For many days no other face has been before my mind's eyes; no other smile has stirred the pulsation of my breast. Marian, I lay all at your feet; will you bless my life and become my wife?"

Elbridge did not notice that he had dropped into poetry, and, indeed, such things are so common in love-making that, perhaps, it scarcely deserves mention. Marian was equally blind, for, though the man was turning his declaration into a farce, she knew that under the surface lurked a spirit which might yet become unpleasant.

"Mr. McKey!" she exclaimed, scarcely knowing what she said.

"Yes, Miss Marian," he encouragingly said.

"I am very sorry to hear these words; sorry for your sake, for I am unable to return your affection."

"You may learn, in time," he said, patiently.

"Impossible! I already know my mind on the subject, and though I thank you kindly, I must say no, once and for all."

"I do not see why you should say no."

"And I do not see why I should say yes."

"Have I not been your friend?"

"I have other friends, but I cannot marry them all," she said, a little impatiently.

"But you should select one from among the number. In this wild country—"

"Thank you, Mr. McKey, but I have already made a selection."

He looked at her in amazement. Not for a moment had he dreamed that he had a rival in the field, and her blunt assertion dazed him. Anger quickly followed on the heels of his first emotion.

"Who is the man?" he demanded.

"I must decline to say," she answered, annoyed at his persistence.

"It is my right to know."

"You mistake, sir; you have nothing to do with the matter," she retorted.

He sat and looked at her in silence for a moment. He was not an unlearned man, nor yet a fool, though he had made a wretched piece of work in his recent proposal; and he was not a man to quietly accept an adverse decision when it could be reversed.

Under the bland exterior he had shown in his life at the Bend, existed a fierce will, a hot temper and a merciless nature. Knowing that he held some strong cards, he fully intended to marry Marian now that he had set out in the work.

"I intend to make it my business," he harshly said.

"You had better not."

"Why?"

"Your interference will not be tolerated."

He snapped his fingers contemptuously.

"That for the opposition. I propose to range your father and your brothers on my side."

"You can not do it."

"I can and shall."

"Sir! you are impertinent! I am not to be tamely insulted, and if you do not cease you shall feel their vengeance."

For one moment a devilish fire gleamed in McKey's eyes, and then it gave place to a smile which was little better, a smile which chilled her to the heart.

"Girl," he said, "you are wise according to

your lights, but you stand in lamentable darkness. There are more things in this world than you in your simple wisdom ever dreamed of." I tell you I hold the Townsend family by the neck. One word from me can ruin you all. You think your family an immaculate one, but there is a dark cloud hanging over this house and one word from me lets loose the storm."

He spoke hotly and his looks terrified her, but she struggled for composure and managed to answer bravely.

"This empty talk is absurd."

"Is it? You never made a greater mistake. I tell you I am master of your future. I know secrets which the world would be glad to hear. I can tell who killed the soldier near the *matte*, and that revelation would bring up a gallows-tree and make a vacancy in this family!"

Marian grew deathly pale. She remembered the blood-stained coat in the upper room, and for a moment everything about her seemed whirling around.

"It is false!" she finally gasped.

"It is true. I can tell all that and more. I can tell who is the chief of the Black Masks. More, I will tell, and, unless you promise to become my wife, I will go out and shout my news. If I do that a howling mob will soon be at your doors. Men will demand the chief of the robbers, and they will find him here. When the rope is around a Townsend neck—"

Marian abruptly arose. Her weakness was gone. She was pitifully white, but her marble face showed that all the strength of her nature was aroused.

"Sir," she haughtily said, "there is the door. Do not let me again mention the fact, but take your hated face from my sight without delay."

He, too, arose, his face almost as pale as hers, but it bore an expression fit for a fiend. Had a man angered him thus he would have murdered him, and he could scarcely keep his hands from the slight girl.

It was an impressive tableau, but at that moment the door was opened and Lucas Townsend appeared on the threshold. Close behind him were James and another person, but Lucas stood as the central figure.

He had entered with a smile on his face, but it died away as he saw the scene before him. He would have been blind had he failed to perceive that something was wrong, and his pleasant face clouded with amazement.

"Hallo!" he said, blankly; but at that moment James entered side by side with a young lady.

The sight so surprised Marian that she momentarily forgot McKey and centered her attention on the girl. She had never before seen her in the city. Younger, probably, than herself, she had a very pretty face, a fine form and a graceful, ladylike manner; and Miss Townsend was at once prepossessed in her favor.

"My dear sister," said James, smiling, "I have brought you a friend whom I am sure you will be glad to see. She has met with misfortune, and we must give her shelter for a time. Miss Nola, this is my sister, Marian."

Nola—for it was indeed the mountain girl!—looked almost appealingly at Miss Townsend, but she need not have doubted her reception. Marian liked her looks, and, woman-like, she held out her hands and then kissed the tempting lips.

"You are very welcome, dear," she said.

"Her father has mysteriously disappeared," said James, "and we feared the same fate would be hers if left unprotected."

"These disappearances are getting very common around the Bend," added Lucas. "Hereafter, Marian, you must not go out without a protector, for there can be no safety while the Black Masks exist."

"Brigham must arouse from sloth and root them out," James impatiently said.

At this moment, McKey pushed to the front. He had become calm, and a faint smile was on his face as he said:

"I will bid you good-day, now, friends. Business takes me away, but I will see you all again sometime."

He nodded to each one pleasantly and then went out, greatly to Marian's relief. Her mind was in a whirl, but she endeavored to center her thoughts on the new arrival, and her kindness made Nola feel almost at home.

James and Lucas had encountered the mountain girl outside the village, rifle in hand, and when James had introduced her to his brother, she said she was looking for her father. Old Prospect had not been at the cave since the previous morning, and she had grown alarmed.

James, too, remembering that the Black Masks were hunting for the hermit, felt grave fears, and he had urged her to accept an asylum at his home for a time.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AND STILL ANOTHER TRAGEDY.

THE Townsends seemed to try to rival each other in attentions to Nola. Marian warmed toward her more and more each minute, and James and Lucas were almost brotherly in their kindness; but it was not strange that the mountain girl should awaken all of their interest and sympathy.

In the midst of the interview Mr. Townsend entered, a fragment of rock in one hand, and he was briefly given an idea of the situation; whereupon, he grew unusually interested and added his voice to the others.

"Sometime, I would like to see your home in the mountain," he said. "What sort of place is it?"

"A cave of considerable size, and not a bad place to reside in," Nola answered.

"What is the nature of the rock?"

Nola hesitated, showing that she did not exactly understand, but James laughed lightly.

"Precisely like other rocks you have seen, father," he said. "There's little there to interest you—no plants, few reptiles, not much of anything except stones."

"I wish there were peculiarities," the naturalist absently said, as he turned over the stone in his hand. "Here is a fragment of rock I found a short time ago and I suspect there is gold in it. I am going to investigate."

He went away and the others discussed the disappearance of Old Prospect. Nola entertained the gravest fears possible. She knew the League of Gold had been hunting him with the avowed purpose of taking his life, and nothing seemed so probable as that he had been found and killed.

James and Lucas endeavored to dispel her fears and said they would do all they could to find the old miner, and as they went out to search Nola looked after James and felt indignant as she remembered how Dupage had warned her not to trust him.

On the surface, at least, James was pleasant and kind, and she felt sure Dupage had maliciously lied, if, indeed, he was not an agent of the Masks.

Luckily, or unluckily, as it was destined to prove, the mountain girl did not know of the tragedy on the cliff after the springing of the ambush laid for the Frenchman.

Old Prospect was not found, and when night fell it became evident that, alive or otherwise, he was not in the village.

Marian did not readily fall asleep that night. The haunting terror of the past few days was beginning to assume form. The blue coat in the garret really had a meaning. McKey had insinuated that one of her relatives had murdered the soldier, Woodman, and the coat went to furnish proof—though how the additional bullet-holes had come in the breast was not clear.

And McKey had declared he could place the halter around the necks of one of her family—more, that he would if she did not consent to marry him. To which member of the family he referred was not clear, for he had been interrupted at the critical moment.

He had retired, but he was not beaten. He would press his suit at such time and place as was to his advantage, and if he indeed held such a power over the family—

If there seemed no doubt about it. The dreadful fears Marian had before had were now gifted with life. He knew something, too much for her good. Ay, he knew too much, for he had declared himself able to find the chief of the Black Masks under the Townsend roof.

"What shall I do?" the girl asked herself. "I would go to Captain Brigham, but, as an officer of law, it would be his duty to investigate rather than smother the matter. I dare not go to father or my brothers and ask anything, for I might learn too much!"

Another day dawned. The Bend was still peaceful. Cactus Jack and Bozeman had been on a scout and reported that the Apaches were gone for good. The Black Masks remained quiet and there was but one new item of interest.

From the painted pale-faces, whom he still held prisoners, Brigham had extracted an acknowledgment that the Apaches had been brought to the vicinity through fabulous tales told by an envoy from the Black Masks. They had been led to think an easy victory and rich spoils awaited them at the Bend, but there had been some hitch in the programme and the red bucks had gone back sorely whipped.

Three days passed quietly.

Cactus Jack and Bozeman had all along kept their own counsel, but one evening the former came to Brigham.

"To-morrow at this hour you can get your fighting-critters into motion, cap'n, he said. "Boze and I have got the train laid, and one match will fire the magazine. We have had hard luck at times and struck a good many false trails, but perseverance has done wonders and we now know where the durned critters are and a good many other things. Get your blue boys ready to march at nine to-morrow night."

At the same hour in a cave in the hills, a new refuge of the League of Gold, a masked man was sitting on a rock and smoking his black pipe in a reflective mood. He was the man known as C, and since the death of A, at the hands of "Captain," he had been the second lieutenant.

He was still smoking when his name was uttered and he looked up to see the chief.

"You look contented," said the latter, abruptly. "Is everything well?"

"All lovely, Captain," the man replied.

"Any signs of those accursed guides lately?"

"Not one. I am sure they know nothing of our new refuge."

"I wish I could believe the same," the chief gloomily said, "but they are keen as knives and I fear their silent work goes deeper than we think. Several times I have aimed blows at them, but each time in vain. They have escaped every snare. Now, I propose to try again. I want you to send three men to the village with orders to watch for and kill them, no matter how."

"It shall be done, Captain."

"Moreover, I have work for you."

"Name it, sir."

"You know the girl, Nola, is at the Townsend house."

"Yes, sir."

"I want her abducted and brought here."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"Pardon, Captain, but what will the queen say?"

"Let her say what she will. I am tiring of her, and if she objects to the new favorite, out goes her light. She is only a woman, at the best. Yet, as you insinuate, she will probably try to kick up a disturbance. She wields a sharp knife, does Zina. So, lieutenant, when you bring Nola here, guard her from the queen."

"I will, sir."

"Any news from Old Prospect?"

"No."

"Queer where he is. We get the credit for removing him, but, for once, we are innocent. I am going now, but don't forget my orders. If you do well, it will make you my right hand man."

"You forget B, Captain."

"If B lives to see another day I shall be sorely disappointed. He has been trying to get all the good things of life, of late, and he must now settle with me. I am to meet him at River Cliff to-night, and, unless he promises to withdraw some claims he is making, one of us stays there as a dead man. In case he crosses the divide, you will become my first lieutenant, C."

"You can trust me in all places," was the prompt reply.

But, when the chief took his departure soon after, the subaltern shook his head gravely.

"I don't like the cut of the dickey. We are carrying too high a hand, considering that a squad of soldiers is so near, and the first we know, down they'll pounce on us. There have been several eye openers for the village cranks lately, and if we steal the girl, won't Rome howl! My worthy Captain, I'm afraid you've bit off more than you can chew, but I won't take water while you use me well. So he is going to salivate B. Good! that leaves me second in command, and B is of no use to the band anyhow."

Meanwhile, the robber chief was proceeding over the hills at a rapid pace, his course being almost due east. The night was dark and few people seemed likely to be abroad, but he did not use any caution whatever and so escaped seeing the slight figure which flitted along in his rear, going where he went.

Had he seen that figure, and been quite near, he would have perceived that it was that of mulatto boy, apparently about eighteen years of age, a light-footed young fellow who glided from rock to rock and kept the League of Gold chief always in sight.

There was little need of caution, for, though the man knew he could never be safe while Cactus Jack and Zeke Bozeman were on his track, he had fallen into such deep thought that he was careless of everything.

In due time he reached the southern trail, crossing it at almost the same place where the emigrants had one night been robbed; and, half a mile further on, he reached the vicinity where the river cut through the lower hills, running rapidly between steep bluffs.

Then he went more slowly, and as he reached the top of the bluff, the mulatto saw another man step from behind a rock and confront him.

Who this latter person was the spy did not know, although he seemed to have considerable curiosity, but it was evident that the men had met by appointment. They began talking at once, and what they said seemed of mutual interest.

Dropping on the ground, the spy crawled as near them as he dared, but the cover was not favorable and he was unable to hear anything. Lying at a distance, he watched them narrowly and chuckled when, from calm conversation, they warmed into heated words and soon seemed on the point of quarreling.

The chief's manner was angry and threatening and that of the unknown firm and stubborn, and when once the former shook his fist in the latter's face it did not seem to make any impression.

"He had better look to his safety," muttered the mulatto. "That fiend would strike him dead without a pang of pity or remorse."

Almost like an echo to his words, he saw the arm of the chief suddenly dart forward, straight and hard, and then the unknown threw up his arms, staggered and fell to the ground without an audible cry.

"Stabbed to the heart!" feverishly muttered the spy.

The chief bent over his victim for a moment and then dropped on his knees beside him. Tearing open the clothing over his breast he seemed to make some sort of an examination and then arose and laughed plainly.

The spy shuddered. To the chief, the murder was as nothing; he could laugh above the body of his victim.

For the space of a minute the assassin seemed undecided; then, seizing the body he dragged it to the bluff's edge and pushed it over. He looked after it a moment, and then, apparently satisfied that the river's waters would bear it away, turned abruptly on his heel and strode away in the darkness.

The spy did not follow him. Instead, he went to the bluff and slid hurriedly down. He, too, believed the river had received the body, but he wished to make sure.

He was well rewarded for his labor.

On reaching the bed of the river, he found that, despite the fact that it flowed between bluffs, there was a narrow border of rocks and sand between river and bluff; and on this belt lay a dark object he could not mistake.

It was the body of the murdered man.

The mulatto paused and pressed his hand over his heart; plainly, his nerves were not strong enough to face all this horror calmly; but after a brief pause, he struck a match and held it near the dead man's face.

He almost instantly started back with a little cry.

"Good heavens! it is Elbridge McKey!"

The discovery seemed to astonish the spy, and from the dead man he looked warily to the top of the bluff. If the chief should return and find him there, his own life would be forfeited.

"Yes," he continued, after a pause, "it is Elbridge McKey. Now, in the name of all that is wonderful, what has he done to anger the chief of the League of Gold! I can not guess now, but I will soon learn. Whatever his crime, he has paid the debt, and the League has lost another lieutenant."

The spy reflected for a moment, wondering what he should do with the body, but first making sure that life was indeed extinct, he decided to leave it where it was, and look to his own safety.

He climbed to the top of the bluff, and then, after looking to his weapons, set off at a good pace in a course which would ultimately bring him to Black Bend.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DEED TOO WELL DONE.

THE following morning Captain Brigham was seated alone in his little den, fitfully smoking his pipe. He had been in an impatient mood for some time back, for, to a soldier accustomed to cavalry dashes, the work of the guides seemed very slow; but on the evening of this day Cactus Jack had promised to take him to the retreat of the Black Masks, and he was beginning to feel happier.

"I will root them out and then resign my office," he was thinking. "I am tired of this dog's life and the West. I will marry Marian, go East, and then—and then—"

And his mind wandered away in rose-tinted pictures of the future.

Day-dreaming was interrupted by the entrance of Sergeant Springer, who came in and saluted stiffly.

"Corporal Barr has just found this note pinned to the barrack wall, captain," he said. "It is directed to you, sir."

Somewhat surprised, Brigham took the letter, which was inclosed in a brown envelope, and proceeded to learn its contents. Written in a coarse, awkward hand, evidently disguised, it ran as follows:

"CAPTAIN BRIGHAM—Men come and go around the Bend very mysteriously of late, don't they? If you would learn of another transplanted citizen, look at the foot of River Cliff at once. You will be well repaid for your trouble, though it will thrust another mystery into your face. Dead men tell no tales. A FRIEND."

Twice the soldier read the note through and then looked up quickly.

"Send for the guides at once, sergeant," he directed.

Springer saluted, stiffly, and went out, but in ten minutes returned with Cactus Jack and Bozeman.

Brigham laid the note before them, and, though it was agreed that another tragedy had taken place, they, too, were a good deal mystified. No one of the trio could guess the identity of the anonymous writer, though Jack remembered his mysterious girl friend and wondered if she had a hand in the work. This self-inquiry was not made public.

"Give me half er dozen sojers an' I'll look inter ther case," said Zeke. "Jack kin stay in town, fur I reckon eyes are needed 'most every-where now."

"Yes," added the giant. "Zeke and I have had a little skirmish this morning."

"How was that?" Brigham asked.

"Three men came to Dutch Hans's shebang and picked a quarrel with us. We tried to keep the peace but they wouldn't have it. Result: they lay over at Hans's in a row; toes up, eyes closed for repairs."

"Drunken miners, I suppose."

"Maybe, maybe; but, if I'm not a liar, they were sent by the Black Masks. Squire, you don't know half of the traps those varmints have laid for us. You know that Tom Knott started the lynching affair at their command, but there have been other traps and tricks you've never heard of. I tell you we stumbled onto a pretty web of iniquity when we come here, and if we hadn't had plenty of sand, we'd been swinging 'round the circle on wings before now, but Boze is a bad man to wrestle and I'm a cactus-tree of some diameter. Yes, this last attack came from them— But, I'm forgetting the note. Send out your blue-coats, cap'n, right away."

The men were sent, and at the end of two hours returned bearing the body of Elbridge McKey. His lips were forever sealed, for there was a knife-wound in his heart, and they were left to grapple with another mystery.

At that same moment, Marian Townsend and Nola were strolling about the nearest hills, arm in arm. Brief as their acquaintance had been, they had come to like each other well. Miss Townsend found in the mountain girl a congenial spirit, and the latter caught at her friendship as only those will who have long been deprived of such society.

The hermit life Nola had led had prevented her from making many acquaintances, but Marian seemed very good and beautiful in her eyes. She already loved her, and she would have been happy had it not been for the mysterious absence of Old Prospect.

Gradually, she was abandoning hope that her father lived, and the fact weighed heavily on her tender heart. Strange in his ways as the lone miner had been, there was always goodwill between them.

Wandering along in earnest conversation, the girls turned a point of rock, and suddenly saw a strange sight—one which amazed Marian.

Only a few yards away stood Mr. Townsend. At his feet was a pile of small rocks and plants, but the object in his hands was of an altogether different nature. He was busily engaged in loading a revolver.

No wonder Marian was amazed, for she had never known her father to even handle a weapon of any kind; but as he finished loading, and extended the revolver as though to take aim, she grew freshly astonished.

Some forty odd feet away grew a mesquite tree, and around the body of this a coat was securely buttoned—a coat of blue, with brass buttons, such as was worn by Uncle Sam's soldiers; and it needed but one glance to show Marian that the naturalist was about to send a bullet toward it.

Instantly a flood of light swept over her. She remembered the blue coat in the garret, the bullet-hole first seen there, and the mysterious subsequent addition of holes, and the whole truth burst upon her.

The eccentric naturalist had used the garment for a target.

Crack!

His revolver spoke clearly; but as the dirt flew into the air a dozen feet from the mark, it was apparent that he had made a wretched shot.

Marian stepped from cover, and then her father started like a guilty school-boy. His pale face flushed, and he looked the picture of embarrassment, if not of shame.

"Having a shooting-match, father?" the girl chirily asked, for a great load had been lifted from her mind, and she felt like clasping him to her heart.

"Yes. No, I am only— Well, you see I—I am only practicing a little."

Mr. Townsend stammered like a boy, and looked as though he wanted to take to precipitate flight.

"I did not know you had a revolver."

"I got one a short time ago," said the naturalist, swallowing an imaginary lump in his throat. "You see, Marian, it don't do to be too peaceful in this country. I saw that everybody else carried revolvers, so I purchased one, and—and—I have been practicing."

He glanced ruefully at his target, at which he had vainly fired seven shots that day, and Marian's gaze wandered in the same direction.

"Where did you get the coat, father?"

"It belonged to Holton, the soldier who was accidentally shot near our house several months ago. You remember we took him in and tried to save his life."

Marian did remember. She recollected the shooting of the soldier well, and though she never knew what had become of his uniform, she wondered that she had not thought of it before.

Really, after the accident, the companions of the soldier had never claimed the coat, because it was mutilated and blood-stained; and when

Mr. Townsend began his revolver work, he had used it as a target because it gave a realistic touch to the practice.

He had always carefully guarded the fact that he owned a revolver or used one. Eccentric in all things, it shamed him when he was finally caught, and once, when Lucas had seen the revolver in his room, he was filled with consternation and afterward kept his door locked.

He had wasted a good deal of lead on the blue coat, but an observer might have told him he could never learn to shoot straight. Probably a more wretched marksman never stepped on the soil of New Mexico; and the few holes he had put through the coat had been made at close quarters.

Marian was too happy to take much notice of his confusion, and when all had been made clear, she caught him around the neck and gave him such a hearty kiss that he was astonished.

At last, the shadow was lifted from their home; the secret of the blood-stained coat was explained; no member of her family was a criminal—

But, what had Elbridge McKey meant when he laid a charge of murder, and of complicity with the Black Masks, at the door of one who was an inmate of the house? What could he have meant?

She vainly asked herself the question as she wandered on with Nola, for, though she hoped the man had told an out-and-out lie, there was still an uneasy feeling at her heart.

Half an hour later the girls reached the house and encountered Lucas and James at the door. The brothers had just come from the fort and had startling news. Elbridge McKey had been stabbed and mysteriously made away with. His body lay at the soldiers' quarters, but no one had appeared to name his slayer.

Marian heard with varied emotions. It is a terrible thing to exult over the death of a human being, and death is always dreadful, but in her heart the girl could not help thinking that, whatever McKey had known, his lips were forever sealed.

Light indeed was the girl's heart that afternoon, but, innocently enough, she laid the foundation for another storm when, at twilight, she coaxed Nola to again go for a walk. The mountain girl hesitated for a moment, for the Bend had not been a safe place of late, but she finally consented, and went out with her revolvers where they could speedily be reached.

Straight toward the mesquite grove they went, the evening air feeling pleasant enough after the heat of the day, and Marian laughed and talked with a vivacity which surprised Nola.

Miss Townsend was in a reckless mood that evening. She knew it was not right that she should venture from the house after dark, and that her brothers would oppose it if they should see her; but there are moments in the life of the staidest man existing when he leans more or less out of his channel.

So Marian, in a moment of undue exhilaration, resulting principally from the discoveries of the day, was committing an indiscretion which was destined to cost her dearly.

When danger came it was with little warning. They were passing near the bushes when four men suddenly sprang out and seized them, giving so little time for defense that Nola, experienced as she was in wild life, had no time to use her revolver.

After that the matter was soon settled. Each girl was in the grasp of two muscular ruffians, and though they struggled as best they could, it was without avail. Even a cry for help was impossible; broad palms were over their mouths and the grip was not to be shaken off.

There was no hesitation on the part of the captors. They bound the girls' hands, covered their eyes and mouths and then strode away in the darkness.

A hundred yards away, horses were in waiting, and the outlaws quickly mounted and, carrying their prisoners before them, dashed away toward the hills.

No one appeared to oppose their departure; the hills were reached and the well-known gulches threaded; and in due time they arrived at the new lair of the League of Gold.

Straight to the lieutenant, the man known as C, they bore the prisoners, only to be greeted with a furious exclamation.

"You have brought them both," added the officer, angrily. "Curse you for thick-headed fools, why did you do it?"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PURSUIT.

CAPTAIN BRIGHAM marshaled his force in front of the fort at twilight, according to the plan laid by Cactus Jack, and little remained to be done before departure. They were going to beard the League of Gold in its den, and no outsider had been given warning of the expedition except James and Lucas Townsend.

They had heard of the project at a late hour, and Cactus Jack unhesitatingly gave them permission to accompany the force. Unknown even to Brigham, the giant guide had made preparations for a few quiet arrests before they started, but something occurred to change his plans.

Just as Sergeant Springer had assured the captain that all was ready for the start, a huge, dark object darted into view, heralded by a peculiar flapping which might have been made by a pair of wings, but which was really no more than the runner's arms.

Grotesque the object at first was, but it soon resolved itself into the corpulent form of Molly, the negress employed by the Townsends, and at sight of the young men she set up a doleful cry.

"Oh! Lord, she done be'n carried off!" she said, incoherently. "De robbers hab got her an' de udder one. Dey hab taken dem away by voylence an' dey will be kill, fo' sure, ef you ones don't run quick!"

Lucas strode to her side and shook her by the arm.

"What do you mean, you idiot?" he demanded. "Stop your infernal whining and speak English. Who is carried off?"

"Oh! de good Lord!" wailed Molly, "dey hab taken Miss Marian."

"What!" thundered James, and he, too, seized the woman's arm. "Are you mad? Marian carried off? Who has done it?"

"I s'pect it was de Black Masks. Dey was men wid dar faces all kivered up, an' dey kerried her an' Miss Nola away on horses. Oh! oh! oh!"

"Stop!" shouted Lucas. "Not another howl—do you hear? Now, be calm and tell us all."

It was one thing for them to command and another for Molly to obey, but she managed after a while to tell that she had been hurrying home from somebody's store, when she saw four men dragging Marian and Nola away from the house; after which, they soon reached their horses, mounted and rode away.

"That settles it," said Cactus Jack, tersely. "The gals have been stolen, and we must look for them in the outlaws' den."

Both James and Lucas were looking strangely pale, but the latter turned to Brigham with a stern face.

"On, for vengeance!" he almost hissed. "In Heaven's name, captain, lose no time but let us go."

His words aroused Brigham as from a nightmare. Not even the brothers were so stricken as he. Marian, delicate, beautiful Marian, the girl he loved, in the power of the remorseless outlaws—the knowledge almost paralyzed him.

But Lucas's words made him once more a soldier.

"Forward!" he thundered, "and remember we go to rescue helpless women. Cactus Jack, lead the way at full speed."

"Bring on your blue coat critters," the giant replied, as cool as though going to a target shoot.

And then the rescuers swept away leaving Molly to wring her hands and sob out her grief at her leisure.

This time the soldiers had taken horses, and as they swept from the village at a gallop, Brigham, James and Lucas rode at the head with stern faces. Cactus Jack and Bozeman had seen harder scenes than that before, and come what might, they would still be veterans of the rifle and the trail.

They conversed in a subdued key as they rode, but no one thought of asking what they said, and the same gallant horses they had rode when first introduced to the reader took them rapidly forward.

Not one of the rescue party saw the single person who, on foot, hung on their trail when they first started; but it was the same mulatto boy who had witnessed the death of Elbridge McKey.

He ran lightly after them for some distance, but their pace was too hot for him, and he finally subsided into an easy trot, seeming confident, if, indeed, he wished to arrive at the same destination, that he would ultimately find them again.

Cactus Jack showed equal confidence in leading the way. He had "lined" the Black Masks in orthodox fashion, and only a sudden change of base on their part could save them from attention, perhaps from ruin.

Anon, when they were quite near the den, a dozen men suddenly appeared in front, but, before the searchers could mistake them for outlaws, the foremost flung up his hands with a hearty shout.

"Hello, thar; save your lead. I'm Bill Bush o' the Lower Bend. What in thunder is up now?"

"Who's with you, Bush?" Cactus Jack quickly asked.

"A dozen o' ther kangaroos from Keokuk, or to put it plainly, so many miners from ther Lower Bend."

"Where are you going?"

"Ter ther Upper Bend ter have a time." "You can have all the time you want right here. We are hunting the outlaws. Better fall into line, you critters, and cut your bizness where you can do good."

"We're with you, all the time. Swing around, you tigers, an' get your toothpicks ready."

The miners fell into the rear and the army went on. Cactus Jack led the way into a can-

yon, the sides of which were cracked and creviced as though from the stroke of a giant's sword. Cross-cuts ran in every direction, some of them narrow but deep holes which ran well back and others ending in a steep incline near where they began.

By the advice of the guides, ten soldiers were posted in the smaller of the clefts to watch and wait, and then the leaders moved into one of the larger gaps.

"Go light and careful," cautioned Cactus Jack. "We are nigh the den and the tiger may show his teeth at any minute. Grit your teeth and feel like heroes."

It was a dark and gloomy place into which he had led them. Barely four feet wide, its height was some sixty odd feet, and the only sign of light was a faint glimmer when they looked directly overhead.

"Darker'n a grave!" muttered Bill Bush, but Zeke caught his arm and gave a warning pinch. There must be no useless talking there.

Brigham began to feel uneasy. He did not like the idea of running his men into such a hole, but he had confidence in the guide and so said nothing. He held a revolver ready for use, and if trouble came his sword was close at hand.

Cactus Jack moved with surprising lightness, but it was a part of his trade. He hoped for the best, but he had warned the captain that hot work was to be expected. The outlaws, whatever might be their number, had the advantage of position, and, unless taken by surprise, would probably make a hard fight.

Were they destined to be taken by surprise? That was the question each of the attacking party was asking himself, but the matter was soon settled.

Out from the darkness a voice suddenly sounded, the nature of the hole making it so hollow and odd that it could not be located, but the words were sufficiently distinct and not hard to interpret.

"Halt, there, you dogs in blue, and all the rest of your gang. You are getting into private grounds and there will be bad weather if you don't square away."

"Who speaks?" demanded Brigham, as his men instinctively halted.

"One who knows you and your business. You want to find the Black Masks, do you? Look out, Captain Brigham, that you don't bite off more than you can chew."

"Do you speak for the outlaws?" continued Brigham, while the guides tried to locate the voice, a difficult matter where the rocks produced such an echo.

"Fair names, old man, or you may get disliked. I speak for those you seek. What of it?"

"Simply this: I have come to take you, and the easiest way is the best for you. Will you surrender?"

"Not if Queen Vic knows herself, and she thinks she does. If you want us, come right along and transact your business; but I give you fair warning that the snake has fangs. Better keep away, my bold sojor boy."

At this point Cactus Jack touched the captain's arm.

"Make no more talk," he said; "you are wasting time. Order an advance and fight it out."

Brigham was ready to obey. He shouted to his men and the soldiers ground their heels in the sand preparatory for a dash, but somebody else was ahead of them. There was a sudden sound in front, the report of two or three revolvers, an oath, a shout and a cry of pain, and then it became pretty evident that the robbers were forcing a fight.

Brigham again shouted "Forward," but just as he uttered the word something came down in a shower and he was beaten to the ground. Just what had prostrated him, he did not know, but as he arose and plunged forward in a blind way, he ran upon something and his hands filled with sand.

The idea had just had time to circulate in his mind that it was like running against a sand-bank when his feet were knocked from under him and he went down again.

Before he could arise a heavy foot was planted on his breast, and something serious might have happened right away had not Zeke Bozeman spoken sharply.

"Hold up, you critters, hold up! We are all friends hyer an' in a durned pickle. Ther outlaws hev dumped sand in ther gap an' buried some of us."

A mocking laugh echoed strangely through the cut, but the assailants had been calmed by Bozeman's voice and they began to take an account of stock.

As the mountaineer had said, a great pile of sand had been dumped down into the gap, completely filling it, and it was that which first felled Brigham. After that, the foot of a partially-buried and struggling friend had knocked him off his pins; but he was uninjured.

As he stood there, a pair of feet began to beat a lively tune on his legs, and, realizing that some buried man was trying to get out, he seized the legs and pulled strongly. Then out came the man; who at once arose, and, dashing

the sand from his face, spoke in the well-known voice of Cactus Jack:

"Lizards and lime-juice! that's a new deal for this board. Buried alive all but my heels, by thunder!"

A hurried examination gave them a correct idea of the situation. The robbers had arranged a great pile of sand and rocks at some point above, intending to crush the soldiers beneath it, but the trap had been sprung a moment too soon, and it looked at first as though none of the attacking party was injured, though the giant guide had been pretty thoroughly buried.

Whether the outlaws themselves had fared as well was uncertain. They had just made some sort of an attack when the sand fell, and it seemed as though they could not have wholly escaped.

"Where are the Townsends?" demanded Cactus Jack, suddenly.

There was no answer, and when their names were clearly called they did not respond.

"They are buried under the sand," Brigham said, in a tone of horror.

An angry exclamation, which was almost an oath, passed Cactus Jack's lips, but he suddenly stopped and changed his key.

"Forward, again!" he said, sharply. "This sand can easily be scaled and we will make the dry bones rattle."

"But, James and Lucas—" began Brigham.

"Pris'ners, pris'ners," said Bozeman, hurriedly. "Don't yo see, boyee? Lead on your critters an' we will soon see ther eend o' ther fracas!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE OUTLAWS AT HOME.

IN a small chamber of the robbers' den sat the new lieutenant of the League of Gold, he whom we have known as "C," but he hardly looked like a hardy robber himself. His face was pale and frowning, and one leg was extended on a pile of blankets in front of him and bandaged elaborately.

He had been alone for some time, but a masked man suddenly burst into the chamber and he looked alarmed as he recognized the chief of the League.

"In the fiend's name," began the new-comer, hotly, "what cursed folly have you been committing? If signs go for anything, we are in an infernal trap and it is all owing to your stupidity."

"Pardon me, Captain, but do you not see I am a cripple?"

The lieutenant spoke in an anxious voice and pointed to his leg.

"What's the matter?" was the curt inquiry.

"Nothing, except that I am crippled for life," was the gloomy response. "A bullet has completely shattered my leg."

"Serves you right for making so bungling a job in abducting the girl."

"Pardon, again, sir, but I was shot before the abduction. I had to trust the job to others, and though I gave careful directions they made a botch and stole one girl too many. I have tried to do my duty, but I worked against luck."

"Is that so?" said the chief, his voice softening a little. "How were you shot?"

"I caught a fellow spying around the entrance, a boy he was, but a man and a devil in venom, and when I tried to capture him he put a bullet in my leg. Of course he got away after that, and here I am, a cripple for life."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," and the chief seemed a little touched by his follower's gloomy tone. "I reckon we will pull you through, unless the accursed soldiers string us all up. Like as not they will, for they are outside in full force. We sprung the sand-trap on them, but the fools above pulled too quick and little damage was done. Who shot you?"

"I don't know, but I thought from the brief glimpse I had of his phiz that he was a mulatto. He was only a boy, but he was chain-lightning on the shoot."

"I don't know him. But, about the abduction; how in tophet *did* those fools make such a bull?" groaned the chief.

"I don't know," said C, groaning in concert, "but blunder they did, though I told them as plain as could be."

"They should die for their folly if their aid was not needed. C, we are in a bad fix and only hard fighting can save us. The soldiers are outside and several men from the Lower Bend with them. Who has charge?"

"I left it to D, sir."

"D, otherwise Drake. A good man. I'll go to him."

And the chief strode away, leaving his subordinate in a mood far happier than his former one. Poor C had been deep in the valley of despondency, for he had expected when the chief knew the result of the abduction business he would serve him as he had of late been serving his other lieutenants.

One had been shot as a traitor in the cave, and another had perished by the same merciless hand at River Cliff, but C had been more lucky.

The chief went directly to Drake, whom he greeted with a nod.

"How are they outside?" he asked.

"Howling like coyotes."

"Our boys can hold them in check for a while. Drake, you are now my right-hand man and I want you to show your nerve. Bassett and McKey are dead. Weeks has a broken leg and the devil is to pay generally. Where are the girls?"

"In the rear room, Captain."

"Together?"

"Yes, sir."

"Separate them. I may want to call on the fair Nola before long."

"For what purpose?" demanded a new voice.

The chief wheeled quickly and saw Zina, and he could not but see the angry flash of her eyes behind the mask. He advanced toward her with both hands extended, but she put her owl behind her back and retreated a step.

"What does that mean?" he asked, in seeming surprise.

"Simply that, before you take my hand, I want to know why the fair Nola has been brought to this cave," was the cold reply.

"Don't you know?"

"Judging from appearances, I should say you wish to play the Mormon," she answered bitterly.

"Good Heaven! what a mistake. Why, I left word to have all explained to you. Did Drake fail to tell you?"

"I forgot it," muttered the man, as his leader bent a keen glance upon him.

"Forgot what? Tell me now," Zina commanded.

"I told him—" began the chief, but the girl queen in periously interrupted.

"Let the man tell his own story. I do not believe you left any message with him. Drake, go on and hang yourself. Why was that milk-and-water girl brought here?"

Poor Drake was in the closest corner of his life. He had got to tell some lie, quickly and plausibly, and he knew not what to say. If he made a blunder, the chief was liable to shoot him on the spot. Fortunately for Drake, his brain moved with the rapidity and brilliancy of a shooting star.

"Why, you see her father is supposed to have a good bit of gold hid in his cave, and as the old man has slipped out, our only hope of getting it is to force the secret from the girl. That's why she was brought here, but I forgot to mention it. I've been mighty busy."

Fear had sent an abundant perspiration to the face of the lieutenant, but the leader breathed freer for the lie had been well told. He felt like clasping his tool in a sort of grizzly hug.

Plausible as the story was, Zina did not believe it.

"I see that you are in league," she coldly said, "but you can not hoodwink me so easily. I believe the girl was brought here to usurp my place."

"Zina!" exclaimed the chief, reproachfully. "I would not have thought this of you. Have I ever been lacking in affection for you? I love you as devotedly as I did the day we joined our fortunes, and no one can do the work of the band as well as you."

"I know I have been useful to you, but the bond between us is one you can easily break when you tire of me. It looks to me as though that hour is at hand, but it remains to be seen whether I will be cast off so easily. My lord duke, another woman shall never reign in my place while I have a dagger long enough to reach her heart!"

The queen spoke with vehemence and fire, and her wily ally settled down to the purpose of reassuring her. Had the situation been less critical he would have ordered Drake to convey her to a dungeon, but Zina had a long head and a sure revolver, and if the worst came her aid would be needed.

So he sent the lieutenant away by a gesture, and in the old tones which had once been so musical to her ear, he labored to make her think him still true.

Woman-like, she believed him after a time, and with her head upon his shoulder asked pardon for the angry words she had spoken.

"Let my excuse be my love for you, dear," she said, softly, "for that love is so strong I would die to help you. The coming of this pretty mountain girl alarmed me for a time, but I see now how foolish I was."

"We will forget it all," answered the traitor, as he tenderly smoothed her hair. "You are all in all to me, and now that this cloud has passed away we will smile again."

"But—but the other girl?"

"It was a mistake that she was brought here, curses on the bunglers who did the work, and we will get her away as soon as possible. Keep out of her sight, if possible, Zina, for harm might come of it."

"The men are fighting outside the cave—what will come of it?"

"Nothing serious, I hope, for on our defense depends our future. I think we can hold the fort—nay, we must, for we can not run. One of two things must be done: defeat the soldiers or die here like rats in a trap. Let me go now and see how the battle goes on."

He left her with a Judas kiss, and went to the entrance. Drake was there directing matters, but a lull had come in the fighting and it looked as though the assailants had found the ground too hot for them.

They had passed the impediment of sand and reached the entrance, but the place was narrow, and the firing from within had killed three soldiers and forced the others back. Drake, in all the glory of his new office, was encouraging the men, and they greeted the chief with a cheer.

"Ha! my brave fellows, I am glad to see you again. I am only just in from the outer air, but now I'll see you safely through. All we have to do is to fight hard and they can never force an entrance."

"If they know the place wal they kin get in," one of the men discontentedly said.

"How?"

"Through the thin places in ther rock I showed you when we first come hyer."

"True, true; but I do not believe one of them knows anything about the place. Be of good cheer, men, we will pull through with colors flying."

The speaker did not feel so confident as he talked, and he admitted his fears to Drake in a private conversation, but he announced his determination to fight to the last gasp.

"I want to thank you for your quick wit in frowning an excuse to quiet Zina," he added.

"You did nobly, and I will reward you well."

"I reckoned you wouldn't want the claws of that tiger-cat in your hair—Pardon me, captain, I meant no disrespect to the queen."

"Don't be afraid, Drake. All I want of Zina is to make her useful in this crisis, and then out of the way she goes. That's the only safe way, for she would as soon use her knife on me as not if she discovered my faithlessness."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE MULATTO REAPPEARS.

AFTER their seizure at the mesquite grove, Nola and Marian endured a good deal of mental anxiety, though they were subjected to no more rudeness than was necessary to carry them to the cave.

They reached that place after a brief but rapid ride, though, of course, with their eyes covered, they had little idea as to where they were being carried; but a halt was made at last, they were made to walk a short distance, and when their eyes were uncovered they found themselves in a small cave-chamber.

A single masked man was with them, and he politely assured them that they need have no further fears; that they were among friends, whatever the events of the last few minutes had made them think, and that, though he could offer no explanation—in fact, he must be dumb from that time—he was to remain on guard and see that they were well used.

He proved his words true in at least one respect; from the time his little oration was finished he spoke not a word, and when the girls addressed him not even a glance showed that he heard.

Finding appeals thrown away, they fell to talking to each other, and both were of the opinion that they were in the hands of the Black Masks.

Half an hour later two men came and separated them, taking Marian from the chamber, and Nola was left alone. She was of a brave nature, as we have already seen, and she maintained an outward composure through all, though the fact that she was in the hands of the infamous League of Gold filled her with a terror she had never before known.

Perhaps another hour had passed when another masked man appeared. He wore a mask which wholly concealed his face, and was slight, even boyish, of build, but his person almost bristled with weapons.

He spoke for a moment with the guard, and then the latter went hurriedly down the passage and soon disappeared from view.

His footsteps had scarcely ceased to sound when the last arrival turned to Nola and spoke in a hurried way.

"Young woman," he said, "I am here as your friend, and if you would escape from this den of assassins you must follow me at once."

"Follow you?" repeated Nola, suspiciously. "And why should I do that? Are you not one of this band?"

"No, I am not," was the impatient answer, "though my disguise has served me so well that the guard has gone away to answer a fictitious call from his leader. When he finds out the cheat he will hurry back, and then, if we are still here, we are both doomed. Come!"

"Tell me who you are, first. I can trust no one who hides his face."

"Fool!" was the angry comment.

Then the speaker tore off his mask, revealing a smooth, boyish face, a yellow skin, and a head of curling hair which bespoke him a mulatto. He was the same mysterious youth we have before seen.

"Look!" he said, sharply. "Is that the face of an assassin? I tell you I am one from the outer world and the deadliest foe that the robber chief has on earth. Will you escape with me?"

"Enough," said Nola, quickly. "Lead where you will and I will follow."

The mulatto resumed his mask, thrust a small revolver into Nola's hand and then turned away.

"Danger lies at every step," he earnestly said, "but we will hope for the best. Be brave and cool and do not use your revolver unless I give you leave."

There was but one way to go; the same in which the guard had lately gone; but the yellow-skinned youth glided rapidly along the passage, his gaze fixed at the front with hawk-like keenness.

Nola's last doubt was gone. She felt that she could trust the youth, whoever he was, and her only anxiety was that they should stumble on the outlaws.

At the first chance the mulatto turned to the left and then they went on through passages which crossed each other with bewildering frequency. Now and then the guide hesitated, but he held to a direct course as near as possible and lost little time.

They were not destined to escape unchallenged, however, for, turning a point of rock, they came face to face with Queen Zina so suddenly that she nearly collided with the mulatto.

Then followed a brief but ominous pause. Nola had grown very pale and the yellow youth seemed moved, but while Zina looked in astonishment he was recovering his wits rapidly. His slight figure was erect and he showed no terror, grave as the case had become.

Zina spoke after a slight pause.

"Where are you taking the prisoner, Pedro?"

She had mistaken the mulatto for one of the band, as the guard had done; he was willing to humor the mistake.

"Her prison-room was not safe and she goes to another," he answered.

"Not safe?" Zina echoed in surprise. "It is the safest place in the cave. Who gave you orders to remove her?"

"The chief."

"I do not believe it, and, by my life, I doubt that you are Pedro. Unmask, at once!"

The woman was excited, and Nola gripped tighter the revolver she was holding in the folds of her dress. The reply of the mulatto seemed rash to madness.

"You are right, Queen Zina; I am not Pedro. What of it?" he demanded.

"Then you are a traitor and I will summon the men."

She caught up a silver whistle which was suspended from her wrist, but before she could use it, the yellow boy sprang forward and seized her hand.

"Stop!" he said, commandingly but calmly. "Nay, do not oppose your strength to mine, for it is useless. Now, be quiet. So, Queen Zina, you would summon your bloodhounds to seize us? Just at present you feel that way, but I will soon change your mind."

Zina had struggled in his grasp, but, finding it useless, now stood with anger and petulance on her face.

"Man," she said, with subdued passion, "unhand me or I will scream for help."

The yellow boy laughed. Then, turning to Nola, he bade her retire a few yards, after which he again spoke to Zina.

"I am going to sweep away some of your false doctrines and notions," he said, "and, since I have acknowledged that I am not Pedro, I will tell you my name."

Nola, having obeyed the mulatto's directions, paused and looked back. She saw him bend and whisper in the ears of the queen; and as he did so she uttered a cry which was almost of terror, her face grew very pale and she seemed about to slip through the floor.

The counterfeit Pedro, however, seemed to have much to say. He retained his hold on her arm, though she no longer struggled, and spoke with feverish rapidity. Not one of his words was audible to Nola, but they seem to fall on Zina and burn like lava.

She was very pale, and one hand was pressed against the wall behind her, as though to guard against faintness, and a variety of expressions passed over her face.

Once she rallied and spoke herself, perhaps to question the identity of the yellow boy, but he temporarily removed his mask and the sight of his face caused Zina to shrink back as before. Then she stood still while he continued his rapid utterance.

Nola, though she could distinguish nothing of what was said, could not take her gaze from the striking picture. The mulatto talked and Zina listened. He spoke with feverish haste, at times fiercely and then sadly, now reproachfully and then accusingly, and the face of the queen was like a panorama.

Amazement, horror, utter misery, anger, which was almost fury, and abject shame were all at times represented, and Nola was filled with wonder as to who the yellow boy was, and how he could so move this imperious woman.

Time was passing swiftly, and they were remaining in the lair of the lion when they might have been fleeing, but even Nola was too interested to notice the fact.

Finally, the mulatto seemed pleading with his companion, and his manner was tender and gentle, but Zina, after acting as though about to burst into tears, gradually grew sterner, and the words seemed thrown away.

Anon, she put out her hands as though to drive the yellow boy back, and when the latter sunk on his knees at her feet she suddenly wheeled and sped away through a narrow passage.

He arose, looked after her until she disappeared, and then turned once more to Nola.

"Come," he said, huskily, almost a sob in his voice.

Nola made no answer, but silently followed where he led. Once or twice he hesitated, but the way grew clearer, and they suddenly emerged into a chamber. Across this and into a passage they went, the guide showing the utmost caution. He carried his torch in one hand and a cocked revolver in the other, and the girl knew they were literally running the gantlet.

Suddenly another light appeared before them, and Nola grew paler still as she saw men around it; but the mulatto only hurried forward the faster. He had seen and recognized Cactus Jack, Zeke Bozeman and Bill Bush, and they were the men of all others he wished to see.

Cactus Jack looked at the pair keenly.

"Who are you?" he asked of the yellow-boy.

"I am Zadoc," was the quiet reply. "I see that my messenger reached you."

"Yes," the giant answered; "he came straight to us, but he did not find the hole so easy again. It is found at last, though, and we three are in, while the boys in blue have been sent for and will come in our rear. Your news has enabled us to slip in at the back door, and if Rome don't howl pretty quick I am a liar."

"The outlaws know nothing of the small entrance

—I discovered it by chance—and if the soldiers move rapidly they will gain an easy victory."

Almost as the yellow-boy spoke there was a shout near at hand, and then followed a pistol-shot, and Bill Bush staggered and fell to the rocky floor.

CHAPTER XL.

A REVOLVER ARGUMENT.

THE shot and the fall of the miner proved that the party was discovered by foes, but Cactus Jack and Bozeman did not waver. They had carried revolvers in their hands, and at the first warning they faced the point of danger. Half a dozen men darted toward them, and one glance was enough to proclaim them outlaws.

The guides wasted no time. Their weapons spoke with a dull roar, and each dropped his man. Bill Bush, who had been felled by a bullet which was turned aside by his broad knife, sprang up and stood by their side.

"Give it ter ther cusses!" he shouted. "Wipe out every two-footed varmint you see."

He fired, but the bullet was wasted on a man Cactus Jack had perforated a second before; and then a dozen fresh foes appeared behind the others.

At their head was the masked chief, and he sprang forward furiously at seeing the intruders.

"Cut down the dogs!" he cried, angrily. "Show no mercy!"

"We want him alive," gritted Cactus Jack; and then a well-directed shot from his own revolver struck the chief's weapon and tore it from his hand.

Nola held her revolver ready for use, but, brave as she was, the scene was too desperate for her nerves, and even Zadoc, the yellow-boy, seemed uncertain and confused.

The outlaws made a rush, and though the three men fired rapidly they were forced back toward the interior of the cave and roughly used, though their tremendous efforts saved them from actual harm.

Bill Bush shouted like a small thunder-storm as he used revolver and knife, but the guides fought in grim silence.

Ordinary men would soon have gone down under such a press of numbers, but those three were made of stern stuff, and they fought like gladiators.

Nola wondered at the apathy of the yellow boy. A short time before he had been brave and energetic, but now all his courage seemed to have oozed away, and he stood like one wholly unnerved by terror. Even Nola was braver than he. She fired her revolver twice, aiming at the confused mass of outlaws; and then the gallant trio fell back rapidly before the furious attack of the enemy, Nola and Zadoc keeping in their rear.

Once, Cactus Jack laid hold of the outlaw chief, but a blow from another enemy struck the giant to his knees, and only for Bozeman's prompt aid he would have fared hardly.

Put to actual but stubborn flight, they had not gone far when they reached a niche in the wall of rocks which presented a narrow face and a rough way behind. Cactus Jack formed a plan at once, and urged his party within. Loose boulders were lying on the floor, and while Bozeman and Bill Bush held the narrow gap, the giant hurriedly threw up a breastwork. Half the work had been done by Nature, and his own labors soon finished the barrier.

Behind this all retreated, and even the mad League of Gold hesitated about attacking so well entrenched and desperate a party. Many a valuable life had already been lost, while the trio of hard fighters seemed to bear charmed lives.

"Why don't you come on?" bawled Bill Bush. "Come an' see us, do! We're at home an' ther latch-string is out. Don't be bashful!"

"Listen to me, you demons," said the chief, angrily. "You have run your heads into a trap from which there is no escape. Sooner or later you must yield to us, and if you surrender now I will give you mercy. If taken at the cost of another life, you will receive the worst punishment I can inflict."

"Now you're shouting," said Cactus Jack, with a reckless laugh. "I like plain talk, and your style will pass in a crowd. However, we ain't doing the surrender act this week, and if you want us you must come where we are."

"This is madness."

"Maybe, but there's method in it. I won't trust you for a cent, for I know you and you know I do. Your neck depends on wiping out Cactus Jack and pard. Well, here we are; come and see us!"

"Fool!" cried the chief.

"You've got it bad. You ought to take something."

"You are signing your own death-warrant by this course. I will have you out of that if it costs me every man in my band, and when I do get you, I'll show you torture which will put an Indian to shame."

"Yes, when you do. That's well put in, you tar-nal varmint. Oh! you're a cyclone with your lip, you are!"

This useless talk continued for some time longer, but it was greatly to the giant's liking, for it gave Brigham a clearer field for operations; while the chief, on his part, was anxious to induce the terrible fighters to yield peaceably.

While they talked, Zadoc had not been idle. His previous work around the cave had showed him that there were many nooks and passages to be found by searching, so he crawled back among the boulders and looked for some avenue of escape.

At first he could see no opening whatever, but by and by he found a hole which seemed to lead into a passage or chamber beyond. It was very small and, slight as the boy was, he doubted his ability to pass through, but he had a resolute nature, and the attempt was speedily made.

It was a close shave, and the rocks rubbed on all sides of him, but he finally forced his body through and hanging by the edge, put his feet down until he touched solid rock.

Then, putting out his hands, he found that he was in a narrow but tolerably even passage, and his spirits rapidly arose.

"We can all escape this way if the hole can be enlarged," he said, thinking of Cactus Jack's heavy build. "We must escape, for the outlaws will sooner or later conquer even these brave men. Let me see where this passage goes."

He was in utter darkness, and as he moved along he kept his hands and feet busy to guard against

mishaps; but he had not gone far when the glimmer of a light ahead showed him he was nearing some place of human occupancy.

"I must see who it is. The light is from a torch, and it may be I shall find Marian or—"

The yellow boy ceased muttering and crept forward cautiously. Not far had he gone when he saw the light increase, and peering around a point of rock, beheld a man seated on a pile of skins, with one leg stretched out before him.

It was the robber lieutenant, C, but Zadoc did not at once gauge the situation.

While he still looked, a hand was laid on his shoulder and he sprang up like a flash. Before him, still heavily masked, stood the chief of the League of Gold!

Meanwhile, the battle had been raging fiercely outside. The soldiers were vastly in the majority, but the few desperate men who crouched near the entrance were making it hot for the assailants, and Brigham did not see how he was going to get at them.

Twice he had ordered a dash, but each time his blue-coats were hurled back in confusion and with severe loss, and the captain had consulted with Cactus Jack and Bozeman without arriving at any definite conclusion as to how the work was to be done.

If it had not been for the possibility that the gang would steal away by some minor exit he would have waited for day; but the guides urged prompt action.

Finally one of the soldiers came to say that he had run on a boy in the darkness who had told him of another entrance. The youth had the yellow skin and crinkly hair of a mulatto, and the blue-coat had never seen him before; but his manner had seemed earnest and sincere when he advised Brigham to try the entrance.

A consultation followed. The affair might be a trap, but the guides were inclined to think the yellow boy all right; so the move was begun, which resulted in Jack, Zeke, and Bill Bush going in as scouts.

Brigham waited outside until their prolonged absence alarmed him, and then, with twenty soldiers at his back, he entered and moved cautiously forward.

It was not a pleasant duty for men who had been taught the art of war on open fields and opposed to so-called civilized foes, but the gallant fellows made the most of it and went on steadily.

Brigham was growing more alarmed for the safety of the guides at each passing moment. They were not men to commit indiscretions, and he felt sure they had fallen into the hands of the Black Masks.

"If it be so, and harm is done them, not one man shall live to tell the tale," he muttered. "The best men of our party are missing—Jack, Bozeman, James, and Lucas; and it would be a costly victory which was gained at the expense of their lives."

At this moment they came suddenly upon a man who was traversing a passage running at right angles from the one they were themselves going through. Plainly, the encounter was a surprise to him, for, after one glance of wild alarm, he took to his heels and fled precipitately.

Brigham shouted to him to halt, and, when the command was disobeyed, fired several shots after him; but the fellow leaped agilely from side to side, and somehow escaped injury.

"Pursue!" thundered the officer. "He will at least lead us to the enemy's lair."

And then the blue-coats struck into a run, dashing through the passage as fast as was possible. Once they caught a glimpse of the fleeing robber, and then the way suddenly widened into a spacious room, and they saw a welcome sight.

The room was lighted by numerous torches thrust into crevices, and filled with articles of almost every description to be found in New Mexico; but the one thing upon which their attention became centered was the body of masked men who were advancing to meet them, fairly bristling with weapons.

Drake was at their head, and it was evident that the decisive struggle was at hand.

CHAPTER XII.

A WOMAN'S VENGEANCE.

WHEN Zadoc, the mulatto, found himself confronted by the robber chief he seemed for a moment to wither under the piercing glance which shot from behind the black mask, but in a moment he recovered and an observer might have seen that he felt no fear.

He folded his arms, but one hand rested on a revolver in his belt.

"Well?" he coolly said.

"Who are you?" the chief sharply demanded.

"Am I not Pedro?"

"I doubt it much. There is an impostor in our den, and though I thought him caged in a hole—Remove your mask!"

The yellow boy promptly obeyed, but as the concern fell away revealing his dark face and curling hair, the chief uttered an oath and made a motion to draw his revolver.

Zadoc was ahead of him. His revolver was out like a flash and the muzzle covered the heart of the chief.

"Stop!" was the sharp command. "One movement and your life is mine, while if you wait I have something to say which may interest you. Drop your hands!"

The order was obeyed, but the manner of obeying was sullen and ominous. The chief did not really fear to try his hand with the yellow boy, but he had begun to feel an interest in him and was willing to hear what he had to say, unpleasant as was the mode of beginning the interview.

"Speak on, then, for I have no time to lose," he curtly said.

"You speak truly, my lord chief. This is a busy time with you, for at your gate is a foe which will surely wipe your gang of ruffians out of existence. More than that, your time on earth is so short that not even repentance can be accomplished."

"Bah!" he interrupted, "I will not hear such folly. If you are a preacher, go talk with women."

"Wait, sir. I am no preacher. You, of all men on earth, should know me well. There was a time when you *did* know me well—far too well for my

good. Perhaps if I was to wash the yellow stain from my face, comb my hair straight again and resume the garments of a woman you would know me still."

Zadoc spoke in a ringing voice. His form was drawn to full height, and, slight as he was, he seemed master of the situation and like a Nemesis.

The chief started.

"A woman's garments?" he repeated, in an uneasy manner, while his eyes seemed reading every feature of the other's face.

"Are you blind? Man, do you not know your victim? Have you forgotten Loella Thorpe?"

The name fell like a thunderbolt on the chief. He uttered a startled cry and shrunk back, his eyes looking wild and terrified, and one hand he unconsciously pressed over his heart.

"You—you—" he began, gaspingly.

"I am not Pedro, nor Zadoc, nor yet a boy. I am Loella Thorpe, come back to life."

"Merciful heavens!"

"No wonder you cry aloud in terror," the counterfeit boy went on sternly, "for of all your sins that one was the worst—nay, it was as black a one as ever stained a man's hand. You found me a girl who, though in a wild country where every woman ought to have a protector, was as innocent and well meaning as any one in the world. It is not to your credit that I remain so."

The man had moved back to the wall against which he leaned heavily. All the iron seemed gone from his nature and he was as weak as a babe.

"But, I thought that—that—"

"That I was dead. Unfortunately for you, your tools did not succeed in their work, but their failure can scarcely relieve your soul of the sin. Do you remember how we met? I was in a quiet mining town, earning an honest living, and you came to me with your fair words and plausible ways. I learned that you were of good family and I came to think you perfect. What was the sequel?"

"You led me on step by step until I loved you as I thought you loved me. One day you took me away from my home, nominally to visit your father's family. Instead, I was brought to the den of the League of Gold, where I learned that you were their chief. The mask fell down and revealed the heart. I saw that, while so fair in outward appearance, you were really an outlaw and a scoundrel and my love turned to loathing. I was, however, still in your power and you made your proposals plainly. If I would abandon my honor, I could be queen of the League of Gold, lead an indolent life and have every thing at my command which money could purchase."

"I refused your offer with scorn and we quarreled. How fierce that quarrel was you remember, for we are both high-spirited. When you saw that I would not yield, you said you would return me to my home. You took twenty men and rode away from Black Bend, but, instead of going toward my home, you went toward the Apache territory."

"One evening you encamped on the desert and sent three men away with me. Their orders were to murder me and then return to you."

During this narration the chief had grown more composed. Terror had given place to a fixed purpose, and the gleam in his eyes boded no good to his companion.

"Now you come to the part of interest," he said. "I have listened patiently to what I already knew; now tell me what followed the departure of the three men."

"A good deal followed, as you will soon learn. Bad as they were, they did not care to murder me outright. They bore me to a barranca, in which was a large pool of water, bound my hands and feet and threw me in to die alone. Then they mounted their horses and rode swiftly away."

"And yet, you escaped."

"Yes. The affair was witnessed by two men who had encamped in the barranca, and when your assassins galloped off they rescued me."

"Who were these men?"

"Cactus Jack and Zeke Bozeman."

"Ha! the same hounds to whom I owe my present trouble. Curses on them! they were born to ruin me. I have laid trap after trap for them since they began their work, but the devil protects his own and nothing can kill them."

"They rescued me," she went on, calmly, "and would have taken me to some refuge, but I left them on the plain and went away alone. From that hour I lived only for vengeance on you. I assumed a disguise and came to Black Bend, and after that I was always busy. I was abroad by night, learning your secrets, and often was in your cave. I was present when you shot Lieutenant A, for plotting to secure your position, and I also saw you shoot Elbridge McKey on the cliff."

"You have kept yourself well out of sight."

"I have figured in another disguise besides that of Zadoc, the mulatto. I was at one time known as Monsieur Dupage!"

"It is false, for my own hand killed the Frenchman."

Loella, as we will now call her, smiled coldly.

"You *thought* you killed him, but you made a mistake. The man who walked into your ambush and was shot dead *did* resemble me as 'Dupage,' but it was the wrong man, and while you exulted over the supposed death of one whom Queen Zina had pointed out as a dangerous person, I discarded my disguise and in my proper character, and as Zadoc, kept up my work. I could at any time have guided the soldiers to your lair, but I had two reasons for refraining."

"You have been wonderfully sharp."

"My first reason was that I preferred to let the guides do their work alone; the other, to save Zina."

"Oho! So your heart bleeds for her, does it?"

"It does."

"You are a philanthropist on a big scale."

"More than that, I am Zina's sister."

"What?" cried the man, startled anew.

"We are sisters. Born on the same day, we lived tolerably happy lives as children, but Brenda—such is her real name—was of a disposition even more restless than my own. She left the old home first, and I never saw or heard from her until, when I returned to Black Bend, I found her in your cave. Ah! you little thought when you sent her away on a

plausible errand and brought me to the cave to take her place that we were sisters, but such was the fact. Poor Brenda! She had been, and she continued to be, more easily led along the downward path than you found me. She has loved and obeyed you, but you found me less pliable."

"I encountered and recognized her the night you made your attack on the emigrants in the pass. I called her by name, but did not reveal my own identity, and until to-night, she has never known that 'Monsieur Dupage' was her sister in disguise. All along I have hoped to save her from eternal ruin, but the future looks dark."

"It is dark for you if not for her," he hissed.

"In what way?"

"You shall die here, and by my hand."

"Do not try it," she answered, with strange calmness. "Think of the fate of the three men who tried to murder me in the barranca. One was shot by Apaches; another, when you sent him to dog the old miner, Prospect, to his lair—for you had seen Nola and aspired to possess her, also—was pushed over the cliff by the old man; the third you sent to the Bend as a spy, but when Tom Knott was shot the last of the trio had gone to judgment."

"I shall not fail as they have done."

"You will make a worse failure. You and your band are doomed; this day is likely to prove your last on earth. The avengers are here, and nothing can save you. You will die, and your masked face will be uncovered. Then your name, now so honored, will go down to future years dishonored and accursed. Man, man, what has made one of your fair prospects so vile a wretch?"

The girl spoke with startling solemnity. She was handsome, even in her disguise, and she seemed like a spirit come to accuse and warn this guilty man.

"So you turn your pity on me?" he harshly said.

"I do not. I turn it on your aged father, your sister—"

"You need not waste your time. Better think of yourself, for I have dallied here long enough, and, by my life, I will not leave you alive. Witch, I will take your miserable existence from you."

He snatched a revolver from his belt, but, again, the counterfeit boy was ahead of him. Neither fired, however, for his own hand was struck upward and he looked around to see Zina.

The queen seemed to have grown older by ten years during the night. Her face was dreadfully white and changed; her hair and garments were in confusion and her eyes blazed fiercely. She scarcely seemed like the same person.

He shrunk from the sight and she laughed wildly.

"Ha! ha! ha! So you no longer have honeyed words for me? Your past and present are known to me at last. You have planned to put the girl Nola in my place and kill me, even as you have twice attempted to murder my sister."

"Zina!" he exclaimed, "what madness is this?"

"You name it well, sir; it is for a woman to trust a man. I gave all up for you and you have proved a traitor. Well, it is the way of men and I need not complain. Yet, the blow has gone deep and I am mad, mad!"

"Zina! Zina! Be calm," he soothingly said, frightened by her wild manner.

"Calm? Yes, I will be as calm as the tigress that seeks her prey. I will show you my calmness!"

She sprang forward so suddenly that her hand was on his throat before he could make a move. He caught her, with an impatient exclamation, but it was his last on earth. He had failed to see that, as she sprang forward, one of her hands drew a secreted knife from her dress, and even Loella, who finally saw the danger, was too late to arrest the blow as she plunged the steel deep into the chief's breast.

Deep and deadly was the wound, and, without a word, the Captain of the League of Gold threw up his arms and dropped to the rocky floor, dead before he touched it.

Loella stood in silent horror, but Zina flung herself on the body and began to passionately kiss the face from which the black mask had fallen away.

The counterfeit boy was wholly unnerved, and he was wringing his hands feverishly when the sound of footsteps was followed by the sudden entrance of Cactus Jack, Bozeman and Captain Brigham.

They were marked in more than one place by blood and powder-grime, but it was plain they had no severe wounds and their stride was that of conquerors.

At sight of the trio in front of them they suddenly paused, and all except Jack looked fixedly at Zina and her victim. The giant had an eye for the *old* Zadoc, and there was tenderness in his glance.

Then he turned to Brigham.

"Captain," he said, "yonder lies the Captain of the Black Masks. He will never do more mischief, if I read the signs aright, and now you may look on his face and see who he was."

He strode forward, while Zina drew back a little in a quiet manner, and then lifted from the dead man the half-disarranged mask she had tried to replace.

Brigham looked, and uttered a cry of surprise and horror.

He saw the still, white face of Lucas Townsend.

"Are you mad, Cactus Jack?" he demanded, after a pause. "He the outlaw Captain?"

"Yes."

"And I, too, say yes," added Loella, moving forward.

"Captain Brigham, it is a strange, sad business," the guide solemnly continued, "and my heart aches for his father and sister; but Justice had to have its due. Lucas Townsend sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind. Boze and I have known for some time what the critter was, but we had to find the new refuge of the band before we could spring the trap. When I told you I had a few arrests to make before we started this evening, I meant Lucas; but the abduction of Marian changed my plan. I saw that Lucas was upset by the affair, which I believe to have been a blunder, and I resolved to let him go with us and keep my eye on him. It was folly on my part, for he slipped away when the sand fell, and I don't know what harm he has done here."

A cry from Loella interrupted him, and they looked around to see Zina lying across the body of the chief. She was gasping strangely, and when

they raised her they saw the hilt of a knife resting closely against her breast. She had seized the opportunity and followed the man she had loved to the other world.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE END OF MYSTERY.

LOELLA cast herself on the still trembling form and passionately kissed the lips which would soon be pale and cold. Whatever her faults, the unfortunate girl had been her sister, and the tie of blood was strong.

Cactus Jack turned to Brigham and Zeke, his face working strangely.

"Men," he said, solemnly, "it is for us to do a good deed if we will. Lucas Townsend lies there dead, and he has a brother, a father and a sister who will mourn his loss. We know him and his crime, but shall we turn mourning into agony by publishing it to the world? His secret rests with us four. Is it not better that we should allow all others to think as they think now, that he was an honorable man, and tell people he died at the hands of the League of Gold?"

Brigham caught at the suggestion. The outlaws were destroyed as a band, two-thirds of them were dead and the others prisoners, and with his work so well done it was not necessary to name their chief. They could keep the secret and spare Marian a lifetime of extreme sorrow.

"Let it be so by all means," he said, quickly.

Then Cactus Jack raised Loella from her dead, while the other two men went on in the passage. At the point of rock a bullet whizzed past Brigham's head, but Bozeman's revolver spoke a moment later and the shot forever ended the career of C, the wounded lieutenant of the band.

The affair startled Cactus Jack, but after an investigation he went back to Loella.

"There's a good bit of mystery in the air," he said, "but it strikes me you are a woman instead of a man."

"You are right," she promptly said.

"Moreover, I think I know you."

"So you do, Jack, for you saved my life in the barranca and it was I who afterward saved you from the assassin hand of Tom Knott."

"Is the time come when you can tell me who put you in such a fix as that in which we found you at the barranca?"

"It was Lucas Townsend, but the particulars must be told you anon. There is much that I will tell you when I have time. By the way, it was Lucas who shot the soldier at the mesquite grove. Woodman was dogging the four robbers, who were taking away some plunder they intended to hide near the river, and when Lucas came out of the mesquite he did not suspect he was a foe. He was shot down in his tracks and the body muffled to prevent a trail of blood and afterward thrown in the river."

"Townsend was a perfect demon at heart," said the guide, in horror. "Boze and I have suspected for some time that he was the assassin, but this settles it."

"I heard it from his own lips as he told one of his lieutenants. That reminds me of one thing I suspect you have learned. Elbridge McKey was an officer in the band, and his business at the Bend was only a cloak to cover his spying. He sealed his own fate, however, when he aspired to win Marian Townsend for his wife. She refused him, and when he went to Lucas and demanded his aid, he put his head in the lion's mouth. Whatever faults, Lucas loved his sister, and when McKey proved stubborn, he shot him dead."

"He did one good deed, at least. Has James been mixed up in this affair?"

"Not in the least. Like his father, he is a worthy and honest man."

"I thought so," said Jack, with satisfaction. "At one time I suspected him, for I heard of his meeting a girl outside the town, and suspected that it was Zina; but I afterward learned that 'twas Nola, the mountain girl."

"I must retract something I once said to her," Loella observed. "I learned that her life had been saved by one of the Townsends, and that he was a regular visitor at the cave. My informant made a mistake and told me it was Lucas; so I went to Nola in the disguise of Monsieur Dupage, and warned her to beware of her new acquaintance, referring to him only as 'Townsend.' Since then I have learned that her friend is James, not Lucas, and I must retract what I said."

At this point Brigham came forward.

"We are delaying here too long," he said. "I must go to my soldiers, and while Bozeman watches by poor Lucas, you had better carry out our plan by bringing James and Marian here."

"Go," said Loella, "and I will do my part."

"We do not leave you in danger," said Brigham. "The outlaws are literally cut to pieces—I doubt if one has escaped. We found James and Marian resting comfortably in little nooks off the main room, bound, but not injured; and Nola, too, is safe."

Cactus Jack and the speaker went away; but not far had they gone when the sound of revolver shots was heard. They dashed forward, and rounding a point of rock, found James facing two outlaws, while two others lay dead before him.

The ruffians had chanced upon him as he was trying to conduct Marian to where Brigham had gone; but they were armed only with knives, and he was making it warm for them.

"He has the Townsend pluck without the villainy," muttered Cactus Jack.

Then he rushed forward, and just as James dropped a third victim, seized the fourth with his empty hands, and dashed him against a rock with such force that he fell senseless to the floor.

It was the last blow struck in the war against the League of Gold. These four men had escaped the general attack only to fall a little later.

Cactus Jack took charge of James and Marian, breaking the news of Lucas's death as they went. It was a hard task, but his work was well done.

Brigham found his blue-coats and the miners listening to a boastful speech from Bill Bush, but after such a victory the oration was excusable.

The captain made preparations for departure and then went back to where he had left Loella and the

others. Marian and James had exhausted their first sorrow over the fate of Lucas. They had been told that he died fighting bravely, and as neither suspected that it was in behalf of the outlaws, they were mercifully spared the greatest grief of all.

With the consent of Loella, the body of Zina was buried in the cave. Perhaps it might be removed some time, but the quietest way just then would cause the least comment. A sister's tears moistened the damp earth, and Cactus Jack was kindly sympathetic, and so ended the last chapter in a misdirected life.

Then the entire party went back to the Bend—Brigham, Cactus Jack, James, Bozeman, Marian, Nola, Loella and the lesser lights; and Bill Bush and his war-horses made the town howl with triumph.

There was mourning at Townsend's, for Lucas had come home never to go away again in life, but the thoughtfulness of their friends saved them the worst pang of all. They believed their loved one had died bravely after living honorably.

The Bend soon resumed its usual quiet aspect. The masked robbers came no more to plunder and annoy, and the change was a welcome one. Brigham won renown from his campaign, but giving full credit to the guides, gained for them additional glory.

One more revelation came on the heels of the others. Old Prospect was found in his cave, to which he had returned after a crazy wandering, and Brigham no sooner saw him than he recognized a man he had known in his boyhood when he lived in Kansas.

The old man's real name was Ordway, and he had worked for a settler named Emmons. One night the Indians burned the cabin, and it was supposed, killed the whole family, but the sequel proved that Ordway saved Emmons's infant daughter and fled with her.

His own injuries destroyed his reason and he had always believed Nola to be his daughter, but she was really named Ethel Emmons.

A few weeks after the destruction of the League of Gold, the Townsend family went East, taking Nola with them, for she had promised to become the wife of James. Marian and Brigham, too, had had a talk which was satisfactory to them.

They left Lucas sleeping under the southern sun. Marian had dismissed all fear that any of her family knew aught of the outlaws. She believed McKey had maliciously lied to her, and the mystery of the blue coat had been satisfactorily explained.

The case of Lucas was a sad and strange one. Brigham believed he must have been partially insane, and the belief did no harm; but, really, he was one of those men who cover bad hearts under pleasant smiles and winning ways. A dutiful son and affectionate brother, he had not the moral strength to resist the temptation to commit crime opened to him in the West; and once on the downward road his cruelty was too horrible for contemplation.

Two years have passed since the events of our story. The stars and stripes still float over the fort, but it has a new name and a new captain, for Brigham has resigned his office and retired from the army. Gold still rewards the digger at the Lower Bend and Bill Bush rules as king. Prosperity reigns, but only a few of the old-time characters are there.

Zeke Bozeman is hunting in Montana once more, but Cactus Jack has abandoned wild life and is on a Texan ranch. If the reader surmises that Loella is his wife it will be no mistake, and no happier couple can be found in the Lone Star State.

At a happy home in the East is a large and growing family. On the day that Marian became Brigham's wife, James Townsend and Nola also joined their fortunes for life, and not one of the four has ever regretted the step.

Mr. Townsend gained great honors from his scientific labors and is still a shining light among the craft. He gave up revolver practice when he left New Mexico and is happy with his bugs and inanimate curiosities. He is very proud of his ex-soldier son-in-law, and with his aid he has added considerable to the literature of the science to which he has devoted his life.

Old Prospect lived the remainder of his days at the Bend. His mind was too far gone to miss Nola, or even remember her, and it was Bill Bush who attended to the last duties due him when he died.

Sergeant Springer is at a post further north, so Bill Bush is left alone to relate the deeds done in the wild days when the League of Gold made life so uncertain in the vicinity of Black Bend.

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